

SIGHT & SOUND

INTERNATIONAL FILM QUARTERLY · WINTER 1985/86 · £1.45 · \$3.50



The Film Industry's Nervous Summer
Simon Relph / Carole Myer / Robert De Niro
C4's Farrukh Dhondy on Ethnic TV
Boorman on Books

"... the remarkable flowering of talent known as the CZECHOSLOVAK NEW WAVE..."

(See article on Czech Cinema by Peter Hames)

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Apologies for the absence from this issue of a report on the 1985 LFF, which is due to circumstances beyond our control. Amends will be made in 86.

On the cover:
 Federico Fellini's
 'Ginger and Fred'.
 Photo: Deborah Beer.

In the Picture The Museum of the Moving Image/Salonica/Silent festival/IMAX/Venice/Quiet days in Pisek/Mona Lisa/1985 Obituary. **2**

◀ **The Nervous Summer of the British Film Industry** **8**
 James Park on the state of home production and the vicissitudes of Goldcrest.

'Boys from the Currystuff' Farrukh Dhondy, Commissioning Editor for multicultural programmes at Channel 4, talks to Andrew Robinson about Britain's 'ethnic' television and the baleful influence of the 'meritocrats'. **14**

Kidnappers & Seductresses Tom Milne visits the London locations of Paul Mayersberg's *Heroine* and Bob Swaim's *Half Moon Street*. **19**

The Coming Tide The Oxford Film Foundation's script competition and the Fuji film awards: John Pym on Puttnam's children . . . **25**

◀ **Double Takes** Kockenlocker on Orson, stamps, not so unknown Chaplin, and a castaway. **29**

Sales Lady Chris Peachment on Carole Myer, who sold *The Draughtsman's Contract* to the States and later ankled it to Channel 4. **32**

The Dark Side of the Landscape Jill Forbes spoke to producer Simon Relph, new head of the British Screen Finance Consortium, during the Dorset shoot of Bill Douglas' *Comrades*. **34**

Gertrud: The Desire for the Image Jonathan Rosenbaum discourses on Carl Dreyer's 'meditation on a frozen destiny'. **40**

Looking for Mr De Niro Mark Le Fanu on an unwritten biography of Robert De Niro. **46**

Almendros on Documentary Cinematographer Nestor Almendros answers questions on his film about Cuban exiles, *Improper Conduct*, and on the pursuit of documentary. **50**

◀ **'Round up the usual suspects . . .'** John Boorman reviews two books on British cinema. **55**

The Sennett Screenplays Did Mack Sennett abominate scripts? Tom Stempel straightens the record. **58**

Film Reviews A Zed & Two Noughts/A Chorus Line/No Surrender & Letter to Brezhnev/Year of the Dragon/My Beautiful Laundrette. **62**

Book Reviews Finally Truffaut/The Story of the Lost Reflection. **68**

Letters **69**

On Now **72**

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MOMI

'A giant Lego set'

As pedestrians obliged to detour on approaching the National Film Theatre have been made forcibly aware, work began last summer on the latest addition to London's South Bank arts complex, the Museum of the Moving Image. When the project was inaugurated some five years (and nearly as many outline schemes) ago, it was hoped to lay the foundation stone during 1983, the British Film Institute's golden jubilee; the building should, however, now be finished by next Christmas and the opening is set for September 1987. The cost will be around £7 million (of which at the time of writing just under £1 million remains to be found), entirely raised from private sponsorship by a range of companies, institutions and individuals. Notably generous donations have been made by the munificent Mr Paul Getty and by the Hong Kong shipping magnate Sir Yue Kong Pao. In tune with the times, we are assured that not a penny of taxpayers' cash is involved.

The museum, designed by Avery Associates, will not, it seems safe to predict, be easily overlooked: the walls will be of steel and glass, with some of the interior on two levels, partly in one 20ft high area, and with the underside of the Waterloo Bridge arches forming the roof. As for the contents, the hope, in the words of Leslie Hardcastle, NFT controller, who together with David Francis, curator of the National Film Archive, has masterminded the scheme, is to span the evolution of moving images 'from cave paintings to laser discs', and to reveal how, technologically and culturally, they have affected our lives.

Intentions are not yet finalised, but the plan is for the museum to be made up of 20 sections, addressing such topics as Pre-Cinema, Animation, the Star System, Video, with the components of each section regularly undergoing some alteration. Aiming to avoid both chronological rigidity and gimmickry, the idea is that the overall *mise en scène*—Hardcastle rather dauntingly likens the interior's movable properties to a giant Lego set—will imaginatively fuse the individual exhibits into more than the sum of their parts. Collection of artefacts in the Langlois manner is not, Hardcastle says, the primary name of the game: 'We're not going searching for Charlie Chaplin's boots, though of course we wouldn't turn them away if someone offered them to us.' There is the promise of con-



Underneath the arches: The Museum of the Moving Image.

stantly functioning slides, tapes, multi-image projections.

The approach will be internationalist, though stressing a British angle where appropriate; the ratio of film to TV in the coverage is provisionally put at two to one. While special exhibitions may be linked to NFT seasons or new books as well as to aspects of current feature productions, the pitch will be to a general rather than a specialist audience. The appeal will be firmly participatory, or in the jargon of the trade, 'hands on', with projection equipment and a functioning replica of a TV studio. A 'non-hierarchical' 30-strong team of presenters will, it is said, combine the attributes (quite a tall order) of hosts, information officers and security staff. In the sphere of participation, moreover, one of the more intriguing ideas to have been floated in connection with the project is for a *quid pro quo* whereby independent film-makers or small companies might care to lay on working demonstrations of, say, editing or animation techniques in exchange for free access to the facilities.

Admission prices will be aligned to those at the NFT, and the calculation is that the museum will need 425,000 visitors a year to break even. The fact that the Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford is currently clocking up annual admissions of around 600,000 suggests that this might be a realistic expectation. It is reckoned, anyway, that MOMI should become self-supporting within two years.

TIM PULLEINE

Salonica

The obstinate fidelity of 'The Stone Years'

Although invited, and indeed eagerly awaited, Melina Mercouri, the Minister of Culture, did not attend the Greek Film Week at Salonica in 1985. The fact that she was elsewhere engaged may have had something to do with the four-year delay in the parliamentary bill designed to give the Greek Film Centre, which finances new Greek films, effective government backing. She did not, however, miss a great deal. Apart from *The Stone Years* by Pandelis Voulgaris, which had previously won a Special Mention from the Venice jury, the dozen or so new features were unable to elicit much enthusiasm from the packed houses at Salonica's main theatre.

Foreign delegates, struggling through long programmes aided only by the most basic of earphone commentaries, were nevertheless surprised to hear Theodoros Angelopoulos, President of the Jury, make some scathing remarks about his fellow Greek directors, particularly since so many of them were intent on paying tribute to his own cinematic style. Even so, a certain amount of grumbling was in order. The basic trouble seemed to be that, in reacting against the vulgarities of Greek popular cinema, the new generation of film-makers have entirely forsaken their audiences. It was all rather like seeing a series of not very well organised first

novels adapted for the screen. Whoever passed half the scripts was doing no one a favour. Chronic self-indulgence was the order of the day, and local audiences were clearly as disappointed as everyone else.

They did, however, accord an ovation to *The Stone Years*, which gathered to itself the best film, best director and best actress awards. It tells the true story of two Communist sympathisers whose love for each other survived twenty years of political harassment, including long stretches of jail under both King and Colonels. A child is born to the couple and eventually they are allowed to marry in prison, with the young son as the only available best man. This extraordinary story of obstinate fidelity is traversed by Voulgaris with total sincerity and patient skill, and the performances of Themis Bazaka and Dimitris Katalifos are excellent.

The film, however, would be a good deal tighter at less than 142 minutes and its over-deliberate pace is another disadvantage. Only two other films could, though, be considered in the same breath. One was a Greek-Cypriot co-production by Andreas Pantzis, *The Rape of Aphrodite*, even longer and slower than *The Stone Years* but beautifully shot and perhaps possessing more basic imagination. About a former Eoka supporter who returns to occupied Cyprus in an attempt to find his wife and child, the film rejects neo-realism in favour of poetic fantasy, resembling a mixture of Antonioni and James Joyce.

This shared the best first film

award and will, one hopes, be re-edited to less than two and a half hours. What will happen to Antoinette Angelidi's *Topos* is even more problematical. Here there is no narrative at all but a superb visual sense which illustrates a young girl's life and early death in the style of various artists of different periods. One hopes other festivals, not afraid of this kind of difficult talent, will take it up. But even the Special Jury Prize may not be enough to get it distributed. Europe's avant-garde, or what is left of it, ought to be interested in this extraordinary new voice. Someone like Derek Jarman certainly would be.

Otherwise, the festival had little to offer this year. Next time round, it must also see to it that the standard of projection is better and that one person, rather than a committee, is in charge. The present headless organisation, with the left hand never seeming to know what the right hand has decreed, is about as satisfactory as the English earphone commentary, which at one point during a particularly difficult passage simply gave up in favour of a cup of coffee and the observation: 'Can't they even provide sugar around here?'

DEREK MALCOLM

Pordenone

Bring in the clowns

While the film heritage of most advanced countries is collected through state archives, and evaluated through regular retrospectives, in Italy we proceed on a rather uneven train, doing our best from one festival to another. During the 1970s it was the Mostra di Pesaro that allowed a general survey of the neo-realist movement and, subsequently, of the Fascist era—belatedly revealing the shadows of the first and the subdued brilliancy of the second. At the same time, the short-lived festivals of Grado and Rapallo helped towards the partial uncovering of the silent era. But all these budgets put together, it could be said, amount to mere pocket money in comparison with the millions spent annually by Venice, Sorrento, Taormina and other festivals bent on keeping up to date with the new.

In recent years Italian scholars have decided to help themselves by founding regional or city archives, like the Cineteca Griffith in Genoa or the Cineteca del Friuli in Gemona. Founded four years ago, the annual Silent Film Festival in Pordenone began with an informal homage to Max Linder. The festival, which is organised by the historian and collector Davide



Francesca Bertini, Sandro Salvini in Roberti's *La Serpa* (1920).

Turconi, subsequently arranged the largest ever number of screenings of works by Mack Sennett and Thomas H. Ince, simultaneously publishing landmark catalogues.

For the 1985 event, the organisers managed to track down hundreds of forgotten one and two-reelers made by the Italian silent clowns before 1914. The Pordenone catalogue lists 41 comedians, each starring in his own series, from Arnaldi to Bob, Cocò, the famous Cretinetti, Gigetta and Gigiona, Robinet, Tontolini, Totò (nothing in common with the Neapolitan star of the 50s). More than half the programme came from foreign collections, including the National Film Archive, the Library of Congress and the Cinemathèques of Brussels and

Paris; a number of titles were printed in tinted versions for the occasion and will remain stored at the Cineteca in Gemona.

Happily, daily discussions between historians and archivists from five continents didn't check the torrents of laughter. However, a few dissenting voices. Noël Burch thought the clowns were rather outclassed by the more inventive French comedians. Actually, it is true that the best Italian stars were imported from France—men like André Deed (Cretinetti) and Raymond Fran (Kri Kri, the real revelation of the festival). Gian Piero Brunetta underlined the reach-me-down poverty of these productions. But their explosive and uncensored vigour contrasts happily with the 'artistic' melodramas that dominated Italian cinema at the time.

Outside the main event, Pordenone hosted enjoyable side-shows, for example an evening of magic lantern slides in an old convent, with coloured transparencies from the Victorian age, presented by Laura Minici Zotti in appropriate dress and style. There was an exhibition about the many inventions of the Frères Lumière, conceived by the Institut Lumière of Lyon. New books about the silent era were introduced by their authors, as were television programmes, like *Gigetta*, by Alberto Farassino, and the very personal series *La Lucarne du Siècle*, by Noël Burch.

Sergio Leone came to Pordenone to see for the first time one of the many features directed by his father, Roberto Roberti (1879-1959), an extraordinary *direttore artistico* of many divas

of the 1910s and 20s. The film itself was entitled *Consuelita* (1925), starring Francesca Bertini as a Spanish girl married to a schizophrenic Englishman. A somewhat torrid story shot on the beaches of Amalfi, it was scored by Ennio Morricone and shown in a recently discovered tinted print. Seventy (or more) films by Roberti are listed in the book by Aldo Bernardini and Vittorio Martinelli published for the festival, and there should be others that survive abroad, for investigation another year. Leone reminisced about his father's career, which stopped short for political reasons under Fascism, to be resumed after the war. His retirement impelled Leone to become a director himself, signing his first Westerns 'Bob Robertson'. Incidentally, Roberti directed in 1913 *La Vampira Indiana*, a significant ancestor of the spaghetti-Western, starring the gipsy-like Bice Waleran, Leone's mother.

LORENZO CODELLI

IMAX

Larger than life

The record of English-language film-making in Canada during the tax shelter years has been dismal, a fact now widely recognised, but Canadians may find some satisfaction in the work of several film-makers outside feature films, among them Christopher Chapman and Graeme Ferguson.

Chapman, a true independent, has worked solely for himself and taken only those assignments he

The Stone Years.





The Dream Is Alive: aboard Discovery. Photo: Threshold Corporation.

believed in since his first short, *The Seasons*, in 1953. He came to fame with his pioneering work in split-screen techniques, *A Place to Stand*, shown at Montreal's Expo in 1967. His latest film, *Wilderness*, his first in 3-D, is an entrancing 17-minute study of nature in North Ontario made for showing in the natural cave auditorium of the new Science Centre in Sudbury, Ontario. He is now working on yet another film in experimental techniques, a history of space exploration for showing in the US pavilion at Vancouver's 1986 Expo.

Graeme Ferguson's *The Dream Is Alive* is currently making the rounds of the Imax circuit in science centres in Europe and North America, from the first Imax installation in Toronto's Ontario Place to the latest at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television in Bradford (UK) and the Museum of Science and Technology in Paris. Ferguson also did work for Expo 67. Convinced that massive screens would be the cinema of the future, he joined forces with Robert Kerr, Roman Kroitor and William Shaw to work at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, to develop an unrealised Australian large-screen projection system using the 'rolling-wave' technique, in which 70mm film ran sideways through an entirely new projector. In 1971 emerged the Imax system, with *North of Superior* (which remains Ferguson's best film) and its first showing at Ontario Place. Now, fifteen years later, Imax (large screen) has also become Omnimax (dome

screen). Both systems use a 70mm 15 perforation format, with separate six-track magnetic sound, projected on screens 50-feet by 80-feet.

The Dream Is Alive, running just under forty minutes and costing \$3.6m, is a Canadian enterprise financed by NASA and Lockheed and made up of scenes filmed by astronauts on three space missions in 1984. It opens with a shuttle returning to earth and landing at Kennedy Space Centre, as seen from the pilot's point of view, and proceeds with the voyage of the next shuttle, including impressive scenes in which astronauts leave the ship to capture and repair the ailing Solar Max satellite. Finding space for the bulky Imax camera on board posed difficulties, but its weight did not once the shuttle was in orbit.

Ferguson could not of course go up with the crew; he therefore prepared a detailed story-board and a list of in-flight shots he wanted the astronauts to get for him. They succeeded admirably, he says, with about a quarter of the total footage shot on the three missions being used in the final version. The camera was equipped with a 30mm 'fisheye' lens, a 40mm 'normal' lens, a 100mm medium telephoto and a 250mm telephoto lens. Unfortunately, we are too often brought back to earth by Walter Cronkite's ponderous moralising and unnecessary music of the thump and clash variety.

At the film's first showing at the Smithsonian in Washington, the audience apparently 'gasped in wonder' at what they saw in

space. In Toronto, the audience merely seemed stunned by the immense sound and size of the picture. Yet, in spite of the size, it is often difficult to get a sense of where we are on the ship, of where it all belongs. In the search for the so-called greater realism in sound and image, how much louder in volume is sound to be and how much bigger is the picture to become before reality is distorted out of all true proportions? One might say, in fact, that 'realism' becomes increasingly difficult to define among techniques such as Imax.

GERALD PRATLEY

Pole to Pole

Venice Film Festival

Venice in 1985 was more remarkable for its profusion of events, categories, special sections and *hommages* than for the films it found to fill them. Easier sometimes to remember the event a film was part of than the film itself; cinema was hunted in a hundred guises, on all shapes and sizes of screen, but was very difficult to find. Something of this blurring of perception is endemic, of course, to the cine-blitz of any festival, and was satirised in the German-Swiss *Der Rekord*, which was actually about watching too much television. A 240-hour tele-marathon turns the hero into a living TV receiver—which sounds like Ray Bradbury, but it's not science fiction, more a good-naturedly slobbish, kitchen sink comedy for the video age.

But over-exposure is not just the problem here. There seemed to be something recessive about the films themselves—as if they had been made to go into special categories, perhaps, or made not to give too much away. A case in point—indeed, its Golden Lion award makes it an exemplary one—is Agnès Varda's *Sans Toit ni Loi*, which begins with its heroine, Mona (Sandrine Bonnaire), found dead in a field somewhere in the South of France. It's not murder, just a hazard of the way she has chosen to live her life, a paradigm, in a sense, of complete freedom—on the road, with no ties or commitments and inevitably courting hunger, privation and casual assault. Varda observes this dispassionately and unsentimentally, but like her landscapes the frame she puts around it has a wintry self-enclosure. Mona in the end doesn't represent too much, not even about herself.

'Paradigm' was also the subtitle of Krzysztof Zanussi's *Le Pouvoir du Mal*, a dialogue on the existence of evil between a young theology student, the arms manufacturer (Vittorio Gassman) who provides him with a

scholarship, and the latter's wife (Marie-Christine Barrault) who flits between them as tease, temptress, figure of fantasy and *agent provocateur*. And the landscape again is a bleak one—a European industrial town between the wars—though imagined extravagantly, a filtered, tinted, nightmarish paradigm. But, for all its flirtation with expressionism, the film, like much of Zanussi, is rather disembodied, stolid moral argument. Not so Maurice Pialat's *Police*, a workaday cop saga in which Gérard Depardieu sorts out a family of dope smugglers, roughs up everyone in the process, and becomes romantically involved with one of his suspects. Pialat's psychological realism mingles with the quasi-realism of the cop story in a way which serves neither satisfactorily.

If 'cinema', in all these major films, was in retreat, it had disappeared altogether from other parts of the festival. These were the cinema-substitute events, featuring pop music videos, television films, television shows about films, and just plain television. (Anyone for Max Headroom, Brian Eno, Tina Turner? or Andrew McLaglen's *The Dirty Dozen: the Next Mission?* or some episodes of *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*?) The British representation was just about confined to the 'sala video', as if the recent renaissance had shrunk back into the box.

One reason why the cinema is in retreat could be because all its forms are now subject to scrutiny. In this context, it's not surprising that the strongest film at Venice really had no form at all to be self-conscious about, was a stark and horrible kind of non-cinema. This was the material shot by army units during the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, showing the ex-guards being forced to inter the last piles of human remains.

This material has already been assembled and shown in a television documentary, with witnesses and commentators to explain how it was originally intended as a memorial to put before the German people. This finished film prompted one TV critic to quote George Steiner to the effect that words weren't adequate to convey the horror of the camps, and to add that, on this evidence, nor was film. But what was on show at Venice was quite 'unfinished', basically just raw footage, for the most part with soundtrack 'noise' rather than a soundtrack, and consequently about as close to the unmediated horror as any non-inmate could get.

Memories of the war informed two other films, both in their different ways old-fashioned and backward-looking, but both also

phrased as regenerative journeys that gave them an emotional and formal confidence so lacking elsewhere. One was titled *A Film-maker's Journey*, being a biography by George Stevens Jnr of his director father, and including some of the unique 16mm colour footage Stevens shot during the war as head of an army film unit. Stevens' switch from comedies before the war to high seriousness (*A Place in the Sun*, *Shane*, *Giant*) afterwards is ascribed by Stevens Jnr to his father's own presence at the opening of the concentration camps. 'A minor director with major virtues before *A Place in the Sun*, and a major director with minor virtues after' is Andrew Sarris' catchy account of that change; but *A Film-maker's Journey* makes a fair and interesting case, a solid 'Stevens' film, on its own terms. Kon Ichikawa's remake of his *Burmese Harp* has already been reviewed unfavourably here from the Tokyo Film Festival. Its thirty-year-old pacifist rhetoric now looks undeniably tendentious (though perhaps no more so than *The Killing Fields*); but it also looks a more extreme, perverse and interesting 'case' than the original film, a lost moral outpost.

Which leads—although the lineage is far from obvious—to Jerzy Skolimowski's *The Lightship*, the highlight of the festival if only because, in its glittering, ice-splinter construction, it could represent either the final breakdown of cinema or a sublime piece of formal trickery, as light on its feet as the boxer Skolimowski used to be. Raymond Durnat once described Skolimowski's idiosyncratic rhythms as faster than Godard and slower than Henry King—or, one might say, George Stevens. There's also a memento of the war—a supposed act of cowardice—carried round by Klaus Maria Brandauer, now ultra-steadfast captain of a lightship, a ship which doesn't go anywhere, a marooned moral outpost.

Two things threaten to destabilise his command: the adolescent son he has taken aboard after some misbehaviour ashore, and three men in a boat, led by an extravagantly lipping, posturing Robert Duvall, on the run from some heist and intent on freeing the lightship from its moorings. The resulting conflict is *Friday the 13th* cinema crossed with Joseph Conrad's *Victory*, a nice formula (from Pole to Pole, as it were) for Skolimowski, whose film rocks at its own moorings like a door swinging to and fro, like a man becoming his shadow, like an eye opening and closing. Like cinema—at last—itself.

RICHARD COMBS

Quiet Days in Pisek

The Czechs still deny their film heritage

For most, the cinema of Czechoslovakia remains a fond memory—the Oscar-winning *Closely Observed Trains*, the humanism of the early work of Miloš Forman, the iconoclasm of Věra Chytilová's *Daisies*. Yet it is seventeen years since the Warsaw Pact invasion put an end to the Prague Spring and with it the remarkable flowering of talent known as the Czechoslovak New Wave. Since then, to judge from press coverage, it has been as if one of the leading film-making nations had been wiped from the face of the earth. Yet this period has seen films such as Chytilová's *The Apple Game* and Menzel's *Cutting It Short*—films worth anyone's attention, but no longer fashionable with British critics and mis marketed in a variety of ways.

The South Bohemian town of Pisek was recently host to a screening of fourteen features from 1984-85, providing a rare opportunity to see a cross-section of Czech films, many without major designs on the international market. It was clearly apparent, however, that the usual high level of technical proficiency was now linked to a genuine attempt to move beyond the banalities that characterised the work of a decade ago.

Two films stood out, both short live-action films by the animator

Jan Svankmajer—*The Pendulum*, *the Pit and Hope*, adapted from Poe and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and *Down into the Cellar*. The first is a nightmare filmed entirely through the eyes of the victim; the second confronts the frightening and surreal events that accompany a small girl's trip to the cellar. Svankmajer is a visionary, as Channel 4's excellent tribute to him last year demonstrated. His explicit continuation of the tradition of Czech surrealism is extraordinary, given the fact that such tendencies have undoubtedly been opposed in the area of feature production.

Perhaps the most idiosyncratic and 'Czech' of the features was Ladislav Smoljak's *Dissolved and Let Out*, its title referring to a body dissolved in a bath of acid. The theatrical team of Ladislav Smoljak and Zdeněk Svěrák first established their brand of sophisticated and absurdist humour in the 60s; they have scripted a number of films, including Menzel's *Seclusion Near a Forest*, but *Dissolved and Let Out* is considered the most successful effort to transfer their stage humour to the screen. Conceived in the context of the turn of the century detective comedy, it has a detective hero who is constantly frustrated by an unseen superior, features such oddities as a clockwork replica of the central character, and is mainly carried by its deadpan and lugubrious style.

In the area of 'significant' film-making, the most interesting works were Antonín Moskalyk's *Cuckoo in the Dark Forest* and

František Vlácil's *The Shades of Ferns*, both scripted by Vladimir Körner. Moskalyk has produced a nicely observed film about a Czech girl selected as an ideal 'Aryan' and adopted by a Nazi concentration camp commandant, with an unusual and humanist portrait of the commandant by the Russian actor Oleg Tabakov. *The Shades of Ferns*, adapted from a prewar novel by Josef Capek, is about two youths who murder a game-keeper and flee from society's vengeance. Vlácil, whose best film, *Marketa Lazarová*, has never been released in Britain, has spoken of his attraction to the simple, banal theme as a basis for more profound concerns. Here, the conflict between youth and society is reminiscent of Némec's *Diamonds of the Night*, but without the same sense of urgency and power.

Films dealing with contemporary issues are still constrained by the heritage of Socialist Realism and the need to build in correct moral and 'positive' attitudes. Jaroslav Soukup's *Love in the Arcade* dealt sympathetically with problems of teenage crime, admitted the existence of drugs, but was never able to get to grips with the roots of the issues. Other films that were at base 'constructive' were Jaroslav Balík's *Nuclear Cathedral*, a fairly transparent attempt to revamp the traditional theme of the ideal worker who sacrifices himself for the greater good, and Jiří Svoboda's *Scalpel, Please*, the story of a neurosurgeon and his fight to carry out an 'impossible' (but successful) operation to save

Robert Duvall (right) in *The Lightship*.



a child's life. Although perhaps less than it seems in terms of characterisation and dialogue, this is a film of some formal sophistication, sensitively acted.

While most of the films wouldn't disgrace Saturday night viewing on BBC2, the fact remains that work of the highest order is not being produced. The reorganisation of the studios in 1983 has obviously had some effect—films no longer insult the intelligence—but there is nothing to compare with the best of recent Hungarian cinema. Scripts are allowed to go further than they did; they still seem to stop short just as they are about to become interesting.

From work seen at Pisek, the younger generation clearly has potential, and some interesting films could emerge if it were given its head. Any improvement, however, must be measured against the continued rejection of many of the major films of the 60s—or their at best grudging acceptance. A recent (1982) historical account of Czechoslovak cinema manages totally to ignore the work of Passer, Jiráček, Jasny, Némec, Schorm and Helge, and excludes major films by Jirěš, Kachyňa, Jakubisko and Kadár and Klos. There can be few countries so determined to deny their cinematic heritage. Of course, the argument is that the films were 'anti-socialist', but more practically the denial is related to the fact of exile, support for the late 60s reforms, or perhaps just a failure to go along with the status quo. Until the government is able to take a more flexible attitude towards these films, and indeed the events of the 60s themselves, the well-laundered script would seem to be the norm—with allegory and pure entertainment as the only escape.

PETER HAMES

Mona Lisa

Low life through the punter's eyes

St Olave's Hospital in Rotherhithe, South London, was a few years ago the setting for *The Nation's Health*, the BBC's jaundiced drama series on medical practice. At the end of last year, the hospital, now out of commission and standing grimly deserted, renewed its association with film-making. It was rented as production headquarters for *Mona Lisa*, the third feature, after *Angel* and *The Company of Wolves*, to be written and directed by Neil Jordan. Several sets were constructed in corners of the rambling, draughty building, though some three-quarters of the shooting has been on location elsewhere in London and in Brighton. The hospital arrange-

ment, says co-producer Patrick Cassavetti (lately of *Brazil*), is more conducive to camaraderie than working out of a big studio, apart from cutting down the overheads.

Jordan conceived the idea for *Mona Lisa* two years ago when he was working on *The Company of Wolves*. Palace Pictures put up development money; and after a projected deal with RSC collapsed, HandMade stepped in with the £2m budget. In the film, Bob Hoskins plays a small-time East End crook who emerges disoriented from a stretch inside and finds work of a sort as chauffeur to a black call girl—a screen debut by Cathy Tyson, cast on the basis of stage work, notably in the recent RSC play about female athletes, *Golden Girls*. The violent climax sees the demise of the vice boss arch-villain; this role is played in a four-day guest appearance by Michael Caine, recruited partly, it seems, because of the amicable relations between himself and HandMade.

The project got the 'green light' in mid-August and during the two months before shooting began, Cassavetti and Jordan busied themselves with research tours of Soho nightspots, trying in Cassavetti's words to see things through the punter's eyes. The atmosphere in the clubs was, he says, 'quite remarkably un-predatory, rather like a sitting-room in Surbiton, though the price of the drinks certainly made you blink.' They visited a nude peep-show which was reconstructed at St Olave's with several of the performers ('mostly art students and sociology graduates in need of extra cash') enlisted for non-speaking parts.

Neil Jordan (left) and Bob Hoskins.



Jordan summarises the research expeditions as 'depressing'. He sees the picture as a deliberate change of pace after *Wolves*: 'I wanted to do something without any special effects.' And despite the apparent affinities of genre, as well as of title, he says the film will be 'much less stylised' than *Angel*. 'It's really an old-fashioned love story and I want it to be shaped around the characters. For the first time, I've deliberately allowed myself room to improvise.' The male protagonist was 'tailored to fit' Hoskins, an actor Jordan sees as possessing the properties of 'an icon' and having a vital capacity for 'excess of feeling'; he speaks also of the screenplay dealing in 'emotional mayhem'. The main problem in an unstylised approach, he concedes, is avoiding TV realism. 'The locations are all-important to the mood. I wanted to give London a kind of foreign aspect—after all, I'm a foreigner in London myself.' The winter sunlight had obliged with hard-edged colour; 'though a lot of it is shot at night, when you make your own light.'

The director returns to a new set-up on Tyson and Hoskins in the call girl's boudoir ('Only two visitors allowed at bedside,' bizarrely proclaims the NHS plaque still attached to the outside of what is now the shooting area). 'We're averaging about three and a half minutes a day,' Cassavetti says. 'Are we on time? Well, more or less.' The next foray is to be to the Ritz. Some hotels lower down the scale had, it seems, been disinclined to offer facilities to a film dealing with prostitution. The Ritz, however, is elegantly above such things.

TIM PULLEINE

1985 Obituary

DECEMBER 1984: Harry Sukman, traditional Hollywood composer (*The Phoenix City Story*, *Underworld USA*); Joe Rock, silent comedian turned mini-tycoon, whose British productions in the 1930s included *The Edge of the World*; Jeanne Cagney, actress sister of James; Jack Mercer, animator at the Fleischer studios who became the voice of Popeye the Sailor; George Waggoner, writer/director of routine thrillers and Westerns (*The Wolf Man*, *The Fighting Kentuckian*); Michel Magne, composer (*Compartment Tueurs*, *Belle de Jour*); Ian Hendry, gritty leading man in the early 1960s (*Live Now Pay Later*, *Repulsion*); Peter Lawford, MGM's postwar model of the aristocratic English playboy (*Easter Parade*, *Little Women*); Harry Waxman, British lighting cameraman (*The Sleeping Tiger*, *Khartoum*); Sam Peckinpah.

JANUARY: John Paxton, versatile scriptwriter (*Crossfire*, *The Cobweb*); Robert Surtees, who shot *The Bad and the Beautiful*, *The Last Picture Show*; Ian Hugo, experimental film-maker (*Bells of Atlantis*, *Apertura*); Anton Karas, wizard of the zither, composer of a single film score; Edward Buzzell, star of Broadway musicals, then house director at MGM (*Marx Brothers at the Circus*, *Song of the Thin Man*); Jetta Goudal, French-born leading lady for DeMille (*The Road to Yesterday*) and Griffith (*Lady of the Pavements*); Ruth Orkin, photo-journalist and film-maker in collaboration with husband Morris Engel (*The Little Fugitive*, *Lovers and Lollipops*); Georgie Stoll, music director at MGM; Paul J. Smith, staff composer at Disney (*Pinocchio*, *Song of the South*); Lord Harlech, President of the British Board of Film Censors since 1965, chairman of Harlech Television; Jean-Pierre Rassam, producer (*Tout va Bien*, *Lancelot du Lac*).

FEBRUARY: Jesse Hibbs, favourite director of Audie Murphy (*Ride Clear of Diablo*, *To Hell and Back*); John Wexley, scriptwriter specialising in crime pictures, Brecht's collaborator on *Hangmen Also Die!*; Wanda Tuchock, whose many screenplays included two for King Vidor, *Show People* and *Hallelujah*; Henry Hathaway; Heinz Eric Roemheld, composer/arranger (*Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Ruby Gentry*); Leonard Spigelglass, scriptwriter (*I Was a Male War Bride*, *Gypsy*); Marie Seton, biographer of Eisenstein and Satyajit Ray, assembler of pre-existing footage (*Time in the Sun*, *Drawings that Walk and Talk*); Clarence Nash,

the voice of Donald Duck; Louis Hayward, rapier-wielding hero (*The Man in the Iron Mask*, *The Black Arrow*); Hal C. Kern, editor (*Gone With the Wind*, *Duel in the Sun*).

MARCH: Run Me Shaw, co-mogul with younger brother Run Run of Hong Kong film industry; Thomas K. Little, set director at Fox (*Drums Along the Mohawk*, *All About Eve*); Anthony Nelson Keys, producer at Hammer Films; Jeffrey Dell, writer, occasional director (*The Flemish Farm*), from the mid-50s associated with the Boultings; Michael Redgrave; G. W. Stonier, alias William Whitebait, film critic of the *New Statesman*.

APRIL: Scott Brady, skilled por-trayer of various hard cases, both in youth (*Johnny Guitar*) and middle age (*The China Syndrome*); Kent Smith, the personification of Mr Average Nice Guy (*Cat People*, *The Spiral Staircase*); Sergei Yutkevich, director of Russian classics (*Golden Mountains*, *Stories About Lenin*); Richard Haydn, character actor (*Ball of Fire*) who directed a little flurry of comedies in the late 1940s (*Miss Tatlock's Millions*); Albert Maltz, scriptwriter, one of the Hollywood Ten (*Pride of the Marines*, *The Naked City*); Marc-Gilbert Sauvageon, much-filmed playwright (*Sortilèges*, *Violettes Impériales*); Jules White, director of innumerable comedy shorts, including a few Keatons.

MAY: Dawn Addams, starlet who never quite shed those last three letters (*A King in New York*, *The 1000 Eyes of Dr Mabuse*); Edmond O'Brien, practised scenery-chewer (*The Girl Can't Help It*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*); Leatrice Joy, silent superstar, the first such to bob her hair (*Manslaughter*, *The Ten Commandments*); Frank Westmore, last of the original dynasty of make-up experts; Margaret Hamilton, the Wicked Witch of the West; Anna Ambrose, British independent film-maker (*Phoelix*, *Honour, Profit and Pleasure*); Jean Bernard-Luc, scriptwriter (*Monsieur Vincent*, *Pattes Blanches*); Wolfgang Reitherman, director of cartoon features at Disney (*The Jungle Book*, *The Rescuers*); Robert Nathan, prolific novelist (*Portrait of Jennie*), occasional scriptwriter (*The Clock*); Harold Hecht, producer, notably in partnership with Burt Lancaster (*Marty*, *Sweet Smell of Success*); Talbot Jennings, scriptwriter, especially of many adventure yarns (*Northwest Passage*, *Across the Wide Missouri*); John Sutro, producer (*The Way Ahead*, *Men of Two Worlds*), partner in Two Cities Films.

JUNE: Richard Greene, swash-



Louise Brooks, Sam Peckinpah, Simone Signoret.

buckler, television's *Robin Hood* in the 1950s; Charles Lemaire, costume designer, head of wardrobe department at Fox; Dominique Laffin, impressive young actress (*Dites-lui que Je l'Aime*, *La Femme qui Pleure*); John Boulting; Piero Tellini, who collaborated on the scripts of *Vivere in Pace*, *Cronaca di un Amore*; Barbara Ford, daughter of John, film editor (*Mask*).

JULY: Jean-Paul Le Chanois, respectable postwar director (*L'Ecole Buissonnière*, *Le Cas du Dr Laurent*); Arthur J. Ornitz, New York-based cameraman (*The Connection*, *Serpico*); Heinrich Boll, author of *Billiards at Half-Past Nine* and *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* filmed by, respectively, Straub and Schlöndorff; Margo, memorable if intermittent film actress (*Winterset*, *Viva Zapata!*); Alvah Bessie, writer at Warners (*Northern Pursuit*, *Hotel Berlin*), another of the Hollywood Ten; Simon Schiffrin, producer of some distinguished silents (*Les Deux Timides*, *Les Nouveaux Messieurs*), later active in television; Kay Kyser, bandleader/comedian (*You'll Find Out*, *My*

Favourite Spy); Ulla-Britt Soderlund, costume designer (*The Immigrants*, *Barry Lyndon*); Grant Williams, who was the *Incredible Shrinking Man*.

AUGUST: Joseph Walker, cameraman on the majority of Capra's films; Louise Brooks; Alfred Hayes, scriptwriter (*Act of Love*, *The Double Man*); Gale Sondergaard, sinister housekeeper and all-round villainess in the 1940s (*The Cat and the Canary*, *The Spider Woman*); Marie Bell, actress with credits stretching across six decades of French cinema (*Le Grand Jeu*, *Un Carnet de Bal*); Lester Cole, scriptwriter (*Objective, Burma!*, *High Wall*), whose death reduces the Hollywood Ten yet further; Morrie Ryskind, involved in the writing of several classic comedies (*My Man Godfrey*, *A Night at the Opera*); Ruth Gordon, actress and writer; Tom Howard, British special effects photographer.

SEPTEMBER: George O'Brien, hero for Ford (*The Iron Horse*) and Murnau (*Sunrise*), later a cowboy star; William Alwyn, prestigious composer of the 1940s and 50s (*Odd Man Out*, *The Crimson Pirate*); Julian Beck, co-founder of the Living Theater, periodically screen

actor in the 50s (*The Last Hunt*, *A Hatful of Rain*); Floyd Crosby, documentary cameraman (*Tabu*), later freelance in Hollywood (*High Noon*); Simone Signoret; African actor Orlando Martins (*Men of Two Worlds*).

OCTOBER: Rock Hudson; Nelson Riddle, composer/arranger (*Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*); Yul Brynner; Orson Welles; Francesca Bertini, one of the first Italian film stars (*Assunta Spina*, *La Perla del Cinema*); Tage Danielsson, who directed *Picasso's Adventures* and Sweden's most expensive production *Ronja the Robber's Daughter*; Diane Thomas, scriptwriter of promise (*Romancing the Stone*); Masaichi Nagata, former president of Daiei, producer of *Rashomon* and *Ugetsu Monogatari*; John Lodge, globe-trotting prewar star (*The Scarlet Empress*, *De Mayerling à Sarajevo*), later politician and us ambassador.

NOVEMBER: Phil Silvers; Helen Rose, costume designer for MGM; Stepin Fetchit, paradigm of the Hollywood darkie; Leslie Mitchell, pioneer television broadcaster and commentator for British Movietone News; Soviet director Sergei Gerasimov.

Compiled by BOB BAKER

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Revolution.

The Nervous Summer of the British Film Industry

James Park

'To be in this business, you have to be constantly making more films'

A lot of effort, hard thinking and sheer obduracy was required to get the British film industry back on its feet in the early part of this decade. On the foundations built by the commercial success of *Chariots of Fire* and the early manoeuvres by Goldcrest Films, a relatively vibrant production sector has been built. As of early 1985, Goldcrest and Thorn EMI were both involved in significant film-making programmes. A number of smaller companies with access to capital funding were in business. Channel 4's low-budget film programme was at last resulting in some serious pieces of cinema. A fair mix of Oscar awards and festival accolades was collected. Decent successes stood alongside a number of box-office failures without anyone looking very worried. Until suddenly, last summer, the sirens started going off all over the place.

Goldcrest and Thorn EMI, the chief players on the British scene, are very different companies. Equally, what happened in the summer of 1985 had varied causes and consequences. Gary Dartnall, chief executive of Thorn EMI, decided that Verity Lambert's contract as production head would not be renewed. The hopes that had attended her appointment three years earlier—that finally the largest entertainment conglomerate based in this country would become a serious force on the British film scene—seemed to end, even as they had been fading during her term of office. The Goldcrest story evolved more slowly, from the management's realisation in May 1985 that the company was going broke. Its lack of funds was not caused by the disastrous performance of a group of films. Rather, James Lee, the chief executive, and the team who took over Goldcrest in January 1984, after the resignation of its founder Jake Eberts, had simply embarked on an over-ambitious production programme which strained the company's resources. The basic precepts of the company's father seemed to have been forgotten in the pursuit of profits and prestige.

There had been nothing to indicate the coming storm. No eagle of foreboding was seen to hover over the British contingent at the 1985 Cannes festival. Executives who were shortly to be in new jobs revelled with as much merriment as the hacks and apparatchiks around them. The promise of a big splash organised by British Film Year came to nothing in a foodless lunch on a slippery yacht moored in the harbour, but that was no indication that the slow expansion of the British film industry was in jeopardy. If there was a message to be drawn from the fact that the British directors represented in the

festival's main section—John Boorman, Nicolas Roeg, Alan Parker—were also the three individuals who had most actively dissociated themselves from a narrow concern with the Britishness of British films, no one was heard to expound that argument. This despite the fact that only Roeg's *Insignificance* had been financed by a British company. Its subject, of course, is the fictional meeting of four American celebrities in a New York hotel.

But were the happenings of June and July more than a minor shake-out in an unstable industry? Did they show that the structural problems involved in building a British film industry could not be solved? One problem exercised the bigwigs at both Goldcrest and Thorn EMI. How should a large company organise itself to select feature films for production? Should one creative person working within the company have substantial autonomy in decision-making? Or should the chief executive be responsible for all major decisions? Should the company have a department to develop scripts and liaise with creative people, or should it leave creative development in the hands of individual producers?

Thorn EMI Screen Entertainment (TESE) is a small part of a parent company whose interests include information technology, records and electronic hardware; and TESE itself is an organisation with a range of interests extending through worldwide video distribution, studio facilities and cinemas. As a film production entity, TESE has a poor record. Its history illustrates the problem of placing a creative person within a large conglomerate which needs to find twenty films annually for its distribution machinery. Verity Lambert was only one area of the 'product sourcing base' of the company. Many others were involved. The acquisitions department bought completed and unstarted films, as well as giving advice on Verity Lambert's choices. Gary Dartnall made deals with American companies for the regular provision of their films and had overall control of creative decisions. Each department of the company felt it should have a key role in approving and determining what product got made.

Verity Lambert's view of the creative judgment of the film sales department was withering. 'When the distribution people tell you that they can distribute a film, it is usually because it is like another film that they could put into a category. If you are interested in making films that have some originality, that is always a problem for them. Almost every single film that I have put money into so far has come back from the



distribution people with a very low assessment. What I have had to do is fight those things through.'

In view of some of the films that emerged from her department, including *Morons from Outer Space* and *Restless Natives*, one might feel that the 'distribution people' had a case. But the record of the more commercially oriented acquisitions department, which includes such inane pseudo-thrillers as *Wild Geese II* and *The Holcroft Covenant*, is far worse. The only way those films could have been approved was because somebody believed that the contemporary cinema audience is living in constant fear of the onset of a Fourth Reich or of the release of Rudolf Hess from Spandau prison. The scripts had certainly not been assessed by someone with a clear understanding of narrative. As of the middle of 1985, Thorn EMI seemed an organisation dedicated to the production of mediocrity, and nothing achieved by Gary Dartnall in three years of reorganising the company had made an impact in that area.

Gary Dartnall, however, was determined to indicate that he had not lost faith in British creative talent. He announced his intention of setting up a series of deals with independent producers. Thorn EMI would establish a revolving project development fund to be drawn upon by a group of producers, who would also receive a contribution towards their running overhead. In return, Thorn EMI would have a first option to invest in any projects developed under the arrangement. The idea was obviously an attractive one for producers, who must otherwise struggle to pay running costs and find the seed money for new ideas. For Thorn EMI, it meant that ideas would come from a variety of sources rather than being funnelled through one individual's taste. The quality of the ideas would obviously depend on the producers chosen.

Dartnall moved fast to draw a group of producers into his net. The choices were catholic. Lord Brabourne and Richard Goodwin were natural choices; they had worked with Thorn EMI from their Agatha Christie films to *A Passage to India*. There was an obvious logic in signing with Euan Lloyd, who was responsible for *Wild Geese II*, and with Verity Lambert. The benefits for TESE of link-ups with United British Artists, run by Peter Shaw and Richard Johnson, and with Jeremy Thomas were somewhat mysterious, since both had access to their own substantial development funds. Recently UBA announced a successful \$1m offering under the Business Expansion Scheme. Jeremy Thomas operates a joint company with Glinwood Films, which is financed by the Hill Samuel merchant bank. The joker in the pack was Simon Perry, whose three-film output for Umbrella is made up of two low-budget pictures and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which went heavily over budget. The broad spread of producers made many in the industry suspicious. 'I think TESE's rolling development fund is a transitional move out of production,' said one producer.



Gary Dartnall.



Verity Lambert.

Dartnall's emphasis on relationships of trust with producers has been a constant of Goldcrest's short history. Jake Eberts' faith in David Puttnam as 'one of the greatest producers going' meant that, as of 30 September 1983, some 44 per cent of the money invested by the company had gone to film and television projects produced by Puttnam. 'I would back David Puttnam damn near blindly,' Eberts has said. 'It would be unheard of for me to back an unknown producer in any circumstances.' While Dartnall was setting up his deals, Eberts was finalising the paperwork on another series of arrangements with producers and directors. Alan Marshall, Alan Parker, Richard Attenborough and John Boorman were among those recruited to his \$5m Allied Film-makers Company. With Sandy Lieberman and David Puttnam already under the Goldcrest net, the competition for talent had clearly been won in round one by Goldcrest. Interestingly, two years earlier, Eberts had remarked that Britain's producers didn't want defined relationships with companies. 'They are confident enough in their own abilities to like the flexibility of not being tied up with any single studio. It happens more in the USA because there are more people scrambling to get to the top. It might come about here if we can develop a large enough body of film financing. If there is competition for talent, then that competition will provoke people to get directors and producers to sign up.'

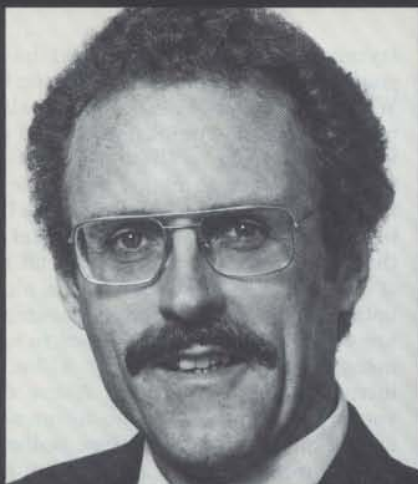
Sandy Lieberman's decision to step down as head of production for Goldcrest had nothing to do with the qualities of his choice or the adequacy of his script development department. No one has expressed any serious doubts about the commercial or artistic wisdom involved in realising the scripts of Hugh Hudson's *Revolution*, Roland Joffé's *The Mission* or Julien Temple's *Absolute Beginners*. The way Goldcrest went about making those films is another question. The official reason given for Lieberman's return to independent production, which had been foreseen in his contract, was that he no longer wanted to be involved with all the hassles of running a production department. It was also clear that James Lee and Sandy Lieberman

had found it difficult to work together. When Lieberman left, Lee made a bid to run the company solo, but the board turned him down. They doubted that he could handle both roles. That was confirmed when Eberts was called back as chief executive and head of production.

During his time at Goldcrest, Sandy Lieberman built up a script development department with a substantial role in the evolution of scripts. James Lee's feeling was that: 'At the end of the day there is not a large number of good British producers. Therefore we shall be forced to become developers of talent.' Lieberman felt similarly: 'There is a vacuum on the production side. Therefore the companies that finance films have stepped into that vacuum and started preparing comments on scripts. In many cases they are absolutely irrelevant, but sometimes they can be quite helpful. A lot of films can be saved and are saved through comments made by the producers or other individuals involved in the production.' Eberts reinstated a policy of reliance on producers. 'Project development,' he said, 'is being handled in the way that it used to be—by me. I think that you cannot separate the head of production from the head of the studio. They are the same.'

Eberts' analysis, that in a large production company power has to be concentrated, seems to have been confirmed by what happened at Goldcrest. The company appears to have made mistakes partly because it had evolved into a bureaucratic tangle where departments were squabbling among themselves and nobody could take an overall view. A failure of the institutional structure is the only explanation of how a company with some of the most talented executives around could make such crucial errors of judgment. The fact that two major films were allowed to go over budget, with no provisions made for the overcosts, was an example.

Lieberman tried to underplay the significance of cost overages on *Revolution* and *Absolute Beginners*, which attracted considerable press attention. 'It is categorically not the cost of the films which has caused the crisis,' he said. But it was the extent of the debt the company had incurred to make those films,



Jake Eberts.



James Lee.



Sandy Lieberman.

compounded by the withdrawal of equity investors who had promised to put up \$8m, and the fact that there was no money to pay the overcosts, that caused Goldcrest's backers to shiver. 'It is going to be very difficult to raise money for Goldcrest and other film companies because of those basic mistakes,' said Jake Eberts on his return. His first priority was to find some cash.

What emerges from the concurrent events at Thorn EMI and Goldcrest is the seeming difficulties that large companies have in making creative decisions. If the company is to run smoothly, the power of a chief executive has to be able to outweigh that of the project departments, and he needs to be involved in the whole range of decision-making structures. As a result, he is bound to take credit for successful and significant films. Both Gary Dartnall and James Lee reached the decision that they wanted to do without production heads who make life difficult and quarrelsome. The difference in their fates was only a measure of the confidence that each had instilled in the company's board.

One problem facing the British industry is the shortage of people

equipped to run a production department. Potential candidates like David Puttnam and Jeremy Thomas prefer to keep hands-on contact with production. Sandy Lieberman has opted to go in the same direction. The production hiatus has deprived the industry of an old guard of producers and directors who can ride the horses of creativity and commerce. It was no accident that a Canadian, Jake Eberts, set up Goldcrest in the first place. And when James Lee was looking around for a head of production, there was scant choice apart from the American Lieberman. The decision to appoint a television executive (Verity Lambert) at Thorn EMI, which seemed brave at the time, now appears misguided.

Another problem, which confronted Gary Dartnall in setting up TESE's producer relationships, also results from the immaturity of the industry. Apart from a small elite of producers who have ridden the storms of the 70s to be swallowed up within Goldcrest, there is not a large number of creative producers working in Britain. The group of production managers who have worked on major US features tend to be efficient nuts and bolts men. There are many new producers with creative verve acquired

from pop promos, commercials and television, but they do not yet have the practical experience to develop scripts, understand budgets and control major features when they threaten to get out of hand.

The American Irwin Winkler might have been able to control the budget of *Revolution*, were he not concurrently involved in *Rocky IV*, shooting in the US, and Bertrand Tavernier's *Around Midnight*. Chris Burt, as executive producer, seemingly did not have the temperament or the authority to stand up to such a strong personality as Hugh Hudson (who had been his own producer on *Greystoke* and a host of commercials). Nor did Steve Woolley and Chris Brown, with only *Company of Wolves* under their belt, have sufficient experience to manage a major musical such as *Absolute Beginners*. The dilemma was expressed by Virgin's managing director, Robert Devereux. 'If you set up a very complicated production with a very inexperienced production team, you are going to have problems. There is, however, an argument that they were the only people who could have worked with Julien Temple successfully.' The comparison between what happened on *Absolute Beginners* and the way the budget of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* escalated, with its effect on Virgin's production plans, did not escape him.

One consequence of the structural reorganisations at Goldcrest and Thorn EMI has been to place the responsibility for nurturing new talent and stimulating but not obviously commercial ideas on to smaller companies, like Virgin Films and Zenith Productions. Virgin has the potential to draw on large resources through its parent company, Richard Branson's music-based entertainments group, and its ambitions are not limited to low and medium-budget films. The company works, however, with a very small staff base. Decisions about films are made by a close group consisting of managing director Robert Devereux, distribution head Keith Turner and production chief Al Clark, with the latter involving himself closely in the development of scripts. 'I don't intend to have a series of production executives in-house,' Devereux says. 'I

Julien Temple's *Absolute Beginners*.



think it's an inflexible and unnecessary system. One reason I don't want a bigger company is the present structure of a small, closely knit team that works well together.' Zenith is run by a similar team: director Charles Denton, production head Margaret Matheson and development executive Scott Meek.

This division between big companies working with the A-team of producers on large international features and smaller outfits operating at the creative forefront will become more clearly defined in the next few years. Another encouraging development has been the ability of such small companies as Quintet Films and Geoff Reeve Films to tap independent finance. But the success of such enterprises in raising cash from banks and financial institutions has been jeopardised by the storms at Goldcrest and, to a lesser extent, problems recently faced by the Thorn EMI parent company. The steady growth in resources and the increase in financial confidence was dependent on the stimulus of Goldcrest's sweet-talking of film investment. When that bulwark was shaken, everything else threatened to come down like a pack of cards.

One way of defining the difference between the large and the small companies will be the scale of their films. When Goldcrest began, its projects ranged from very low-budget films made in association with Channel 4, like *The Ploughman's Lunch* and the *First Love* series, through pictures on the scale of *The Dresser* and *Local Hero*, to big-budget pictures like *The Killing Fields* and *Gandhi*. Very few films in the first two categories made returns on a scale that was significant for a large company carrying a major overhead. 'I think there is even less room now for the lower-budget films,' Jake Eberts says. 'The window available for low-budget films in the early 1980s has been shut, and the reason is that a number of films simply haven't lived up to their promise. There are just so many darn films around. All the reviews in the world don't get bookings and people into the cinema.' Goldcrest's recent investments in low-budget films, such as *Dance with a Stranger* and



Nigel Terry in Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*. Photo: Mike Laye.

A Room with a View, have been as an international sales agency putting a small amount of money into a film in return for handling world sales rights. The company can take a distribution fee for handling sales and have first access to the money, which it then allocates to the other investors. It is a comparatively low-risk position.

Equally, however, Goldcrest under Jake Eberts will not enter into the sort of big budget bonanza initiated by Lieberman and Lee. The poor performance of the low-budget pictures and of production from the company's television division resulted in a pre-tax profit figure of £1.61m for 1984, which was acknowledged to be 'well below our target for return on investment.' The resulting spending spree was probably an over-reaction. 'I have to concentrate most of my efforts on making commercial films with the potential of making quite a large amount of money,' Lieberman said in December 1984. 'I have got to do it or there will not be a Goldcrest and I will not have a job.'

In a more unguarded way, another executive derived the company's production policy from the fact that 90 per cent of the annual US box-office return goes to about ten films. 'What we are

trying to do is make films that have a good chance of coming into that top ten.' When the budget of *Revolution* escalated to \$25m, Eberts ruefully remarked that it would have to be the most successful film of the year to make any money at all. His own preference has always been to make films in the \$8-10m bracket. 'At that level,' he says, 'you can lay off a lot of the costs and limit your risk to almost nothing. The breakthrough possibilities are very commanding. It's hard to make money on a picture costing \$15m; it's lucrative stuff if it works. Above that, you are really getting into never-never land. I hate going over fifteen million.'

A concentration on big-budget films forces the companies involved to work closely with the US majors, with their access to the world's most lucrative theatrical market. Goldcrest has always had a policy of pre-selling its films to an American major before embarking on production, these deals having most often been made with Warner Brothers. The negotiation of such arrangements is time-consuming, involving regular crossings of the Atlantic to nurture relationships with the heads of the studios.

One way round this problem might be to arrange for a major to take a line of product from the British company. A partnership relationship might also be negotiated to enable the British company to establish a direct lien on moneys from distribution. There are several counter-arguments. The distributor can never be compelled to take any particular film. It is much more difficult to fix a deal with another distributor when you are known to have an output deal in place. Also, the film by film deal enables the production company to take advantage of a distributor's particular need for a film to fit into its overall package. 'The lack of a normal exclusive distribution partnership,' James Lee once said, 'is at one and the same time the greatest strength and the greatest weakness. The greatest strength because there is always a combination of events at a particular time which are special, which means that if you can be totally flexible and totally opportunist you can find the reason why distributor x is the right distributor.'

Jake Eberts, however, has recently been converted to the advantages of such an arrangement. The main factor is the instability in the higher echelons of the studios. The lead time between making the deal and distributing the film is such that there is a significant chance that the executives handling the film will not be those who made the initial deal. 'What you need,' Eberts suggests, 'is a distributor who already has say 70 per cent of his pictures and needs the 30 per cent that we can supply. We need a respected, powerful distribution group. That doesn't mean having offices. It means having product to get the right kind of booking with the right kind of cinemas. I know from past experience that the major studios get better numbers. They can book better theatres, they can get payments faster, they simply have the power like any major force

Drew Schofield and Gary Oldman in Alex Cox's *Sid and Nancy Love Kills*.





Robert De Niro in *The Mission*. Photo: David Appleby.



Revolution: Al Pacino and director Hugh Hudson.

in the marketplace to get the deals.'

If such an arrangement is established, it will be dependent on Goldcrest's ability to contribute a steady flow of product. Recent events have also demonstrated the need for Goldcrest to keep on producing films. It cannot lay off when the good ideas stop coming through. With an overhead hovering around the £3m mark, cashflow is a prerequisite of continued operation. An unfortunate consequence of the management reshuffle at the end of 1983, which led to the replacement of Jake Eberts by James Lee and Sandy Lieberman, was withdrawal from John Boorman's *The Emerald Forest*. In the fifteen months that elapsed before any other pictures went before the cameras, Goldcrest simply stopped making pictures. That the films started rolling all at once was an indication of haste bred by necessity. When Eberts returned, a key priority was to get some more films made: 'You cannot afford to carry the sort of staff that we have just on the revenues of past films. To be in this business, you have to be constantly making more films.'

One decision made by the Lee-Lieberman management stands as a symbol of the extent to which that management had lost its sense of reality, forgetting just how precarious is the life of any film company. Eberts had established Goldcrest in comfortable and inexpensive quarters in Holland Park. Shortly after the financial panic bells started ringing in Goldcrest's accounts department, Lee moved the company to offices in Wardour Street which were expensive enough for Thorn EMI to have turned them down. As they humped their cases through the grand entrance, several executives noted that they were looking out on a Job Centre.

The low-budget film sector operates in very different conditions. The stakes are smaller and more risks can be taken. Money from Channel 4 or the British Screen Finance Consortium can make a significant contribution to costs. Large companies peopled by lawyers, accounts executives and financial personnel are not required to get the films moving. The relationship between executives and

production personnel can be much closer. Films do not have to be presold before production; in fact, since they usually lack stars and immediately definable commercial elements, their making depends only on the creative judgment of the financing company.

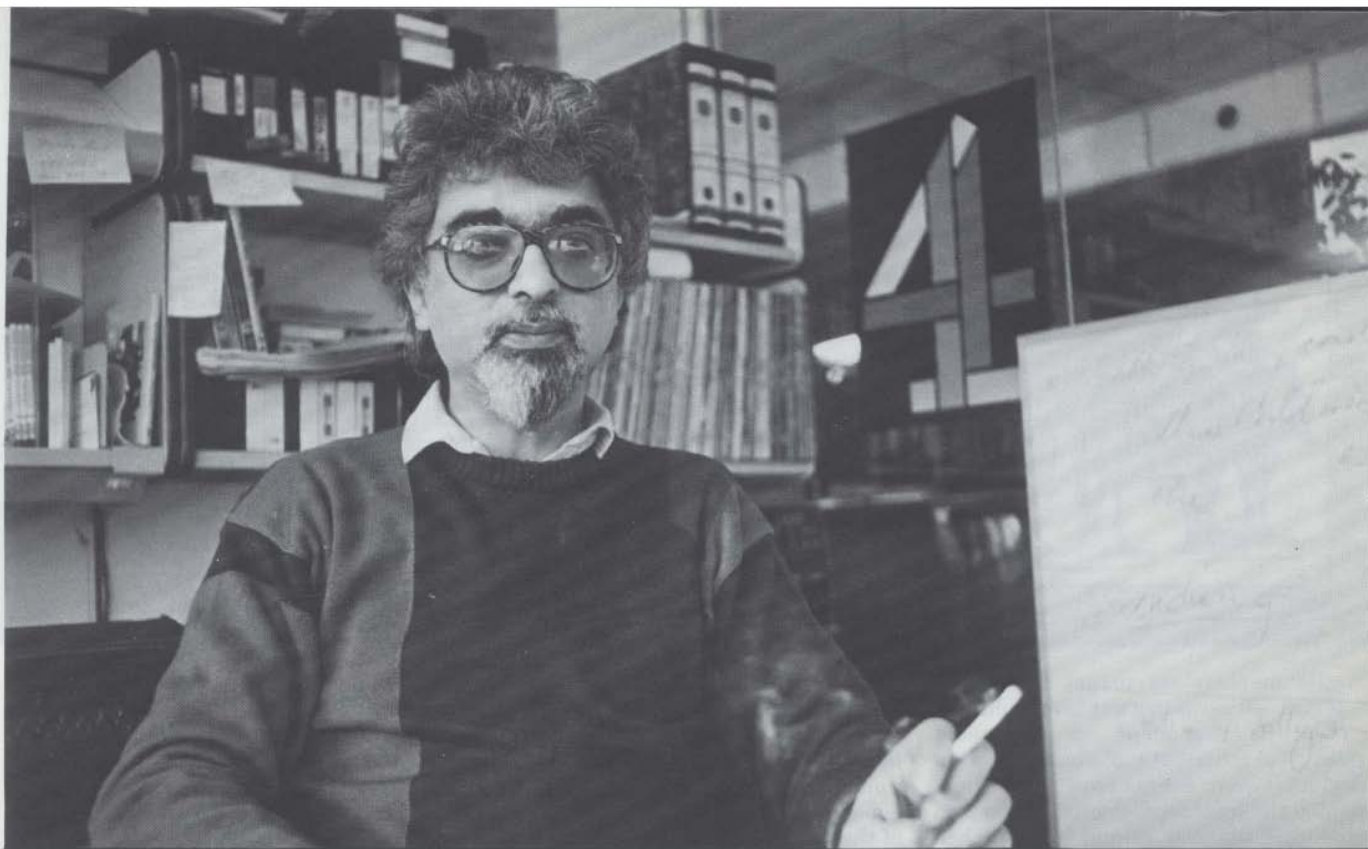
But some of the same problems apply. The lengthy search for a chief executive for the British Screen Finance Consortium, the privatised successor to the NFFC, indicated just how few competent producers want to move into an executive role. Equally, the way Simon Relph, producer of *The Ploughman's Lunch* and *Wetherby*, declared that he would run the organisation when appointed to the post suggested that the problem of decision-making in this sector had yet to be resolved. Mamoun Hassan, former managing director of the NFFC, had often talked about the problem of evolving a clear strategy for a body where the board had to agree upon every major decision. Those responsible for hunting down a chief executive for the BSFC took this admonition to heart in their search for a 'paragon of virtue with the autonomy to make his own decisions.' Hassan later clarified his objection as having more to do with his lowly status in relation to the board than with the existence of the board itself. Relph, however, proposed to do without a board structure. 'The previous body tended to support things that they could all agree on. I think that was very hard to do. One of the advantages I have is that I can design the way I make investment decisions.' There is no doubt that Relph will apply his best efforts to encouraging new film-makers and steering people towards money. It is less clear whether a chief executive without a hothouse testing ground in which to define policy and develop production plans can actually make the right investment decisions.

In autumn 1985, the low-budget sector was experiencing a mini-boom. Seven films rolled in September, a record for one month. They ranged from Bill Douglas's *Comrades* and Derek Jarman's *Caravaggio*, the two most famous unmade films of recent British screen history, to *Ping Pong*, an English *Dim Sum* set in London's Chinatown, and included

more ambitious projects such as the Virgin-financed *Heroine* and Zenith's *Sid and Nancy Love Kills*. Interestingly, all the directors involved are primarily film-makers, whereas much previous low-budget production came from directors whose experience had been in TV or the theatre. Five of the seven were also writers or co-writers of their films.

At the same time, a number of British low-budget films were doing quite well in the United States on classics release. In most cases the distributors had put out only a few prints, so that returns were coming in slowly, but the performance of *A Private Function*, *Dance with a Stranger* and *The Shooting Party* augured well. Each promises to make enough profit for the financing company to encourage other films to be made. At this end of the industry, the foundations look quite strong, and it's just possible that Britain can build a secure production industry at this level.

Assessing the future for the larger companies is more difficult. The whole structure of Thorn EMI Entertainment is currently in the balance, as chief executive Gary Dartnall goes about trying to raise the cash for a management buy-out, with the support of the parent company's board which is also seeking bids from other buyers. If the company should fall to an American conglomerate, the current interest in British production is likely to take a back seat. If Dartnall takes over, there are signs that he is focusing more attention on securing a position from which the company can rival Goldcrest. A hotting up in the competitive atmosphere is recognised by Goldcrest's management to have its advantages. 'We welcome anyone who is setting up,' said one executive a few years ago. 'It gets a bit lonely sometimes.' Thorn EMI's spread of businesses and strong video distribution network provides a powerful structure. For Goldcrest, wholly dependent on a supply of feature films, the prognosis must be more doubtful. 'It's an extremely tough nut to crack,' Jake Eberts says. 'I am not at all convinced that you can make it work year in and year out on a pattern that will satisfy investors.'



Farrukh Dhondy.

'Boys from the Currystuff'

Television programmes showing Britain's minorities have a comparatively short history. The BBC started the idea off with their rather bland vernacular language Asian magazine programmes on Sunday mornings. In 1978/79 ATV joined in with *Here Today, Here Tomorrow*, three films about Asians in Britain produced by Zia Mohyeddin. Through informed interviewing Mohyeddin built up a remarkable portrait, in places a trenchant one, of potential conflict, and finished with a note of warning: 'They are saying that if acceptance, if integrating with them means eating fish and chips, then we don't mind staying as exiles and aliens, but we are staying on.'

The enthusiastic reception for these programmes led Central tv, the following year, to agree to a Sunday 'multicultural' magazine programme, *Here and Now*, to be produced and presented by Mohyeddin locally. This has been running ever since. The first drama series was produced by the BBC in 1983, written by Farrukh Dhondy and consisting of six stories of British Asian life across the generations. It was called, with due irony, *Come to Mecca*—a reference to Mecca Dancing. The arrival of Channel 4 brought *Eastern Eye* and

Black on Black, magazine programmes produced by LWT for Channel 4, with more of a current affairs emphasis than the other magazines.

But it was not until after the appointment in mid-1984 of Farrukh Dhondy as

Andrew Robinson talks to Farrukh Dhondy, multicultural programmer at Channel 4

Commissioning Editor for Multicultural Programmes, taking over from the work of Sue Woodford, that real movement has taken place. The past year or so on Channel 4 has seen the broadcasting of Dhondy's own entertaining comedy series *Tandoori Nights*, about the rivalry between Indian restaurants

called the Jewel in the Crown and the Far Pavilion, which was actually commissioned long before his appointment. There have been two series of *Here and Now* half-hour specials, produced by Mohyeddin but commissioned by Dhondy. Subjects have ranged from documentaries on the chef Kenneth Lo, the South African theatre troupe Black Dog, a Pakistani-born escapologist and Caribbean calypso, to drama like *Pravina's Wedding* and *The Empress and the Munshi*, a brilliant one-man performance by Zia Mohyeddin as Queen Victoria's Indian Secretary, written by Farrukh Dhondy. It displayed Dhondy's trademark: a mischievous humour. As he says, 'It was telling the anti-racists in Britain—look, Queen Victoria was the first anti-racist.'

Innovation of a sort has come with the arrival of Bandung Productions, run by Dhondy's old friends and political co-workers Tariq Ali and Darcus Howe. Bandung was responsible for *The Painter and the Pest*, a film about the controversial discovery and subsequent promotion in London of an obscure American painter by an English lecturer from Bangalore. More recently, their quite hard-hitting series of six documentaries has been shown, as *The Bandung*

File. One of these was the subject of controversy when it uncovered evidence of membership-rigging in the Labour Party in Roy Hattersley's constituency, allegedly to prevent the selection of a black candidate for Parliament. By a not so surprising coincidence, such rigging forms part of *King of the Ghetto*, a new drama series set in the East End, written by Dhondy, again featuring Mohyeddin, and directed by Roy Battersby, which the BBC will transmit during the first half of 1986, although the scripts were written long before the Bandung evidence came to light.

Another important film has been the much praised *My Beautiful Laundrette*, written by Hanif Kureishi, directed by Stephen Frears and commissioned by Channel 4, though not by Dhondy. It portrays the shady practices of a businessman and his associates of Pakistani origin in London, their interaction with the gutter racism of white bover boys, and the response to all this of a young relative of the businessman who wants to get on in Britain in 1985. Most critics have commended the film for its supposed 'Britishness', its importance and its sensitivity and humour. To me it seems rather tedious sub-Starsky and Hutch, with a really unpleasant tendency to glamorise racial violence and hostility under a pretentious veneer. Dhondy shares some of my reservations but confesses to feeling mischievously gleeful that the film has upset what he sees as the consensus view of immigrant life among the educated white middle class. It is now up to him and Jeremy Isaacs, the Chief Executive of Channel 4, to decide how much of such writing will be filmed for the Channel.

Isaacs, who particularly admires Dhondy's short stories of Indian life, stresses the variety of influences in Dhondy that will enable him, Isaacs hopes, to give mature expression to Channel 4's avowed dedication to multiculturalism. 'The great advantage of people like Farrukh,' he comments, 'is that he is a creator in his own right and doesn't think in categories. He takes a sophisticated view of the transition from arrival as immigrants to a kind of assimilation into the ways and culture of a society that inevitably overtakes succeeding generations, though at different paces in different communities. Almost the single most interesting aspect of Farrukh's work in relation to the Asian community is the complete divide within it between traditionalists and younger people. Farrukh's perception as a writer fits him to get this right and not to take too simple and single-minded a view.'

Farrukh Dhondy's background in India is summarised by his witty, gritty short stories of Poona life, collected in *Poona Company* and *Trip Trap*. He was born into a Parsee family of engineers, though his father was a soldier. 'Engine-drivers in the family would not have been tolerated. Non-Parsees were, because of a certain nationalistic Gandhian ideal. But the family didn't like it at all.'

As a boy he was a clever, bespectacled



Central Television's *Here and Now*.

rebel and associated with a group of friends, 'to some extent bad hats', who later peopled many of his stories. 'I moved with a lot of streetwise people. I was at the polite end of streetwiseness.' He was also reading voraciously, including R. K. Narayan and V. S. Naipaul's newly published *Area of Darkness*. 'We read with absolutely no critical understanding. We would read Thomas Hardy and Marie Corelli with exactly the same attention as if they were both masterpieces.' When he was offered a scholarship to go abroad, either to an Ivy League university, to Oxford or Cambridge, or to Russia, he chose Cambridge, largely because he liked Forster's description of it and had read *Jude the Obscure*. Like the young Naipaul, his contact with Britain at this time was entirely literary.

At Cambridge he read Physics in Part

The Empress and the Munshi:
Zia Mohyeddin as Queen Victoria's secretary.



I and then changed to English, and 'pretended to be artistic.' This was followed by a PhD at Leicester on Kipling, whom he had always loved. 'This was the late 60s. I was very firmly part of that left-wing movement, but I wanted to bring to it some fresh ideas. One of these was that Kipling was not such a reactionary as people thought.'

He was recruited in Leicester by the Indian Workers Association and came to London, where he became a political activist in the East End, and also took up teaching. He taught at three different comprehensives, experiencing the tough conditions that produced his *Come to Mecca* stories. He was also writing plays. Five have so far been produced, at the ICA, Arts Theatre and, briefly, at the Cottesloe, among other places; the latest was called *Vigilantes*.

He appears to be split between a desire to write about Asians in Britain and Indians in India, but is acutely aware of the difficulties of continuing to do the latter, living in Britain. 'I do think I write about what I am well acquainted with. I guard against being, in the Indian sense, a behafist. I know that there is a generation of intelligent writers, film-makers and political writers who produce fiction and tracts on behalf of the Indian working class. I don't know anything about the Indian peasantry, not intimately.'

Zia Mohyeddin is in a privileged but strange position to comment on Dhondy's writing and attitudes, having acted several of his best characters but coming from a very different, cultured, Indo-Muslim background in Pakistan. 'I have a lot of time for his writing. He's bringing into play his experience as a social worker, community worker and teacher. His portrayals are exceedingly good, especially those in Brick Lane, which has been his habitat.' He is slightly critical of Dhondy's political stance interfering in his writing: 'I think he believes very strongly in certain things—perhaps that justice can only be

done if the conservatives of this world are not there. Sometimes he projects this commitment into "low life", as though truth lies solidly on their side. But I don't think I'd dub him a left-winger. In *King* he's seen through the very bogus socialist politicians' philosophy and done it very effectively.' Now that he is working at Channel 4, Dhondy will not be writing again for television for a while; he is contracted not to. Instead he is letting his activist side have full rein, and enjoying it. 'This is a job in which the joy of it is being conscious. In writing you get into a sort of trance.'

ANDREW ROBINSON: In the twenty-odd years that you have been in Britain, has there been an improvement in subtlety of understanding among British people of films about India?

FARRUKH DHONDY: Absolutely.

***A Passage to India* and *The Far Pavilions* notwithstanding?**

Yes. I think *The Far Pavilions* is what they would have liked to watch in 1964, when I first came here. I think the British taste has been educated, Salman Rushdie notwithstanding!

What *The Jewel in the Crown* does is flatter the British by saying we are now going to tell you the truth about Empire and you are big enough to take it. And the truth is that your sordid battles between grammar school and public school boys were enlarged into imperial themes. I'm not convinced that Paul Scott is right about that. I'm not convinced that the tragedies of India arose out of the misplaced ambition of grammar school boys. Paul Scott puts anachronistic Merrick and Kumar there because he is exploiting the conscience of the British public, whose taste is now made by meritocrats. But the British characters in the series had register, tone, local habitation and name. None of the Indian characters did. I don't think Paul Scott understood the difference between a maharajah and a mahout.

So what did you think of Rushdie's mockery of the British characters?

I think Rushdie is two separate characters: the inventor of his novels, and the bogeyman of the *Guardian* and the *Observer*. The substance of what he says is, whatever they do is wrong. I think that betrays a certain unsophisticated approach to politics and political criticism. When he writes about Gabriel Garcia Marquez in the *London Review of Books*, he writes excellently and perceptively. When he's writing in the *Observer*, 'épater les Anglais' becomes the prime consideration. The problem is that we British-Indian writers have lost the innocence of, say, R. K. Narayan. We find ourselves compelled to be half politicians when we write.

I know Salman Rushdie likes *My Beautiful Laundrette*. Do you?

I think it's efficiently directed and acted, but it goes too far. The reason I welcome it is non-artistic. It puts the cat among several critical pigeons. The pigeons who believe that all art from the immigrant



My Beautiful Laundrette: Gordon Warnecke, Daniel Day-Lewis.

communities must be community relations art.

Which is?

Make women strong; it doesn't matter if they are weak. Make them speak in tones that will raise some cheers among two-and-a-half feminists. Make Asians look as though they are broadly integrated into the managerial structure of the National Westminster Bank—rather than hanging about.

These people make two mistakes. One, that art should explain blacks to whites, which is no purpose of art at all. Two, that it should deal in positive images, so that people will come to respect, willy-nilly, the black community. If I wanted to do that in television, I would turn my entire budget over to Saatchi and Saatchi. If they can make a good job of Mrs Thatcher's image, they could, for a little more money, make a good job of the West Indian and Asian image.

For a genuine and sophisticated integration into British society—and there's no looking back from that—the only way to go is for blacks to participate in the entire spectrum of sophistication that the British have made for themselves through their tradition and history. If whites can take sit-coms about Cockneys, blacks will have to do the same. Hanif Kureishi has broken that barrier—that all art must be community relations art. He is given money to write his plays because people believe he's going to write the opposite. He is given money on the positive images ticket. He chooses to defy it. People will say, 'You're doing dirt on your own people. We wanted to find out about blacks. Arranged marriages are all right, but what is this?'

Who are these people?

There is in Britain today—and I think one could make a tragedy of it—the meritocratic character, who either fights on other people's behalf or makes his or her life a total absorption into the soft progressive issues of the day: anti-

racism, anti-sexism, pro-gayism, pro-South African blacks—a *Time Out* or *City Limits* consciousness. The idea they share is that the mass of the British people are stupid. They believe that everyone who drinks in a pub or goes to a racetrack, or is their uncle or aunt and so on, is racist, sexist and prone to media manipulation. They are the cognoscenti; and they want to do something for this population. But if they actually succeeded in doing something their lives would be a failure, because they live by their distinction from the mass. If, for instance, you say that the British working class is, by and large, not racist, you have done 50,000 people out of their jobs in Britain. And I'm out to prove it.

How long have you felt this?

I always knew it. I also know that there is a fringe who bomb places. On 15 March 1973, someone threw a fire bomb into my house in Brixton and I jumped out of the second-floor window. But as soon as I believe that all the mumbles in pubs are racist and the aunties who tell you blacks are really vicious are in the majority . . . I don't believe the mass of the British people are like that. I think they are humorous, forward people with a democratic instinct, people whom I want to excite through any television I put on. It's not for the meritocrats.

Do you want to commission any work which is entirely about Indians in India, Chinese in Hong Kong, Jamaicans in Jamaica?

I have done. There is a population in Britain now which is thirsty for knowledge about the countries their parents and grandparents came from. There is also a renewal of contact in a new form for that older generation. The BBC has a tradition in this area, of social anthropology and curiosity: someone finds a temple in which the rats and prostitutes live and interact. And of course there is news coverage of Africa and the Caribbean and so on. But I think there is a



Tandoori Nights: Saeed Jaffrey.

fourth dimension. I am trying to find films which in their small subject become metaphors for the social and political life of India or Pakistan or the Caribbean or Africa. To be directed, quite deliberately, by British directors who go out there and make discoveries. Because the audience has to discover those countries through the film.

What are the subjects?

The first is to be a 75-minute film on the tiffin-carriers of Bombay, the guys who carry lunch to all the office workers. You ask yourself why they don't have a canteen. They don't because there are a million castes in India. You have to have your own lunch cooked by your wife or cook or whoever.

Why a British director?

Because the population of Indian origin for whom I am broadcasting these films lives in Britain. They've eaten school lunches here, not from tiffin-carriers in Bombay.

The other two films are documentaries about Bhopal and about Catholicism in India. Catholicism is a faith accessible to the West, but its manifestations in India are not known. This film is about a fishing community in Goa, where Catholic priests support fishermen against trawlermen. The Bhopal film will be about ordinary families and how the tragedy has affected them. Rather than a countdown of Union Carbide's crimes against ecology, which is for *World in Action* or *Panorama*.

So how will your approach to these subjects differ from the BBC tradition? Each film will give you an insight into one central problem or tragedy of the Indian body politic, and while doing so it will also be good television. Subtitles will be used throughout. These photos on the wall of my office are for a series on cabaret in Bombay. It's a new phenomenon. The girls strip at a club. The film interviews the girls, the club owner, a regular client, and the wife of the client,

sitting next to him. She's an ordinary Gujarati housewife. It's amazing stuff. Then one of the girls goes back to her village in Andhra Pradesh for her sister's wedding. She has brought a lot of money, but she's not allowed in the house. They treat her as a prostitute, which she is. She has to sit outside. She says to the camera, I am what I am, but I shall deliver my present and then go home. The camera turns to her mother who says, She used to be my daughter but is no longer. It's a great climax to a story which gives you an insight into village and city life. If anyone from Bradford, Manchester, Birmingham, from that second generation, tells me what anti-racism is, this is what they have to learn first. In India there's regionalism and casteism of a vicious sort.

So it's didactic?

What else am I here for? I could have had a career as a writer. I said I'd do this job for these purposes. I want to convert this department to being black in the context of Britain.

Would you agree that the documentaries in *The Bandung File* are rather a mixed bag?

Yes, they are. But they are slowly making their way in British programming. Bandung is proving that it can do an investigative report into politics, an interview with an African head of state, a reggae concert, or that it can get into Whitehall for an investigation of immigration, which other current affairs teams cannot do. It can also bring in the dimension of French racism, which raised the sympathy of the meritocrats.

The interview with President Nyerere by Tariq Ali and Darcus Howe struck me as a bit slack.

Well, he was about to resign—only the second head of state in Africa to do so. He's a man of great stature, no doubt. I would have hated it if my commissioned interviewers had gone in for the kill.

You wouldn't do that for, say, Macmillan, at the end of his life. There were some searching questions and Nyerere did say some things extremely critical of himself.

How many of the Bandung team are black?

At present it's a coalition between white ability and black editorial intelligence. We have to train blacks. Part of my job is to find the black sector that is versatile, sophisticated and expert. *The Bandung File* is a small step towards that. There has never been anything like it on British television: reportage from blacks about blacks for the general public watching television.

Why did the earlier magazine programmes flop?

They didn't flop. But I personally thought their quality of journalism was not incisive enough. I also thought the magazine format a bit of a bind. They ran the entire gamut, from total frivolity such as what Asians call their dogs—after Asian or British names—to investigative stories that investigated nothing in particular; just smartness of a very vague sort.

So what do you expect of the new Bandung magazine to replace *Eastern Eye* and *Black on Black*?

My determination is that Asians and West Indians are joined: it's about bloody time! It will include news headlines and ten-minute reports from a territory abroad which is important that week. There will be twenty-minute reports of investigative journalism from Bradford, Birmingham, Brixton, Toxteth, Southall and so on, with real news teams. There will also be high culture, if, say, Satyajit Ray wins a Nobel Prize. The people who will make it have an overview of the South Asian subcontinent, the Caribbean and Africa, and they will bring this to the reporting of foreign news, which is not usually done on British TV. It won't be a multi-racial magazine, but a magazine of international affairs that all the British people ought to know about.

How would it handle riots in Britain?

I believe the Bandung team can tell a story that no other British television company can tell, because they have an intimacy with the actual landscape, a historical insight into the evolution of black communities in Britain—it's where they come from—and finally they have, in the best sense, a responsibility to the community. Bandung is not hampered by an anti-racist ideology, the simple formula that riots are caused by Thatcherism and racism, which is all I have heard from the media on the left. For the right they are caused by criminal elements.

How do you hope to get at the truth?

By asking people to do their research. I have now seen several programmes done by the BBC and by Granada, very well-meaningly no doubt, in which you get hold of some black youths and ask why they don't work. The answers you get are the ones they have heard from social

workers or that they think the camera wants. They say we're discriminated against, I went for a hundred jobs and didn't get them because my face is black, and so forth. If you actually examine that same youth, he hasn't been for no hundred jobs at all; he probably gave up after the first time. Something else is going on but he refuses to say that to the camera.

What would he say to a Bandung researcher?

That we shall have to wait and see.

What is *The Mix*, the series that LWT are going to produce for you?

It's a short series but it will be longer if it succeeds. It's about the Afro-Caribbean British culture: song, music and dance. I hope that a whole flavour of styles will come out. The thing to guard against is that it mustn't become a programme for Bumpies—Black Upwardly Mobile People. I've recently been to some London Bumpie Clubs. I was amazed. They are all accountants, lawyers, civil servants there, dressed to the hilt. They can't let you in wearing a hat. I asked them why not and they said West Indians who wear hats are badly behaved. It's all civilised, with soft American disco music and cocktails. I'd only seen it before in New York. The danger is that *The Mix* will only do that. I want it to go down-market too.

What other ideas have you for the future?

In two very specific areas. I want to nurture black drama on screen. I don't believe we have any accomplished television playwrights from the Asian or Afro-West Indian community. There are some plays on stage that have something to say, but what the writers lack is the transitional technique to television.

You tried a competition?

That was a very hit or miss affair. A more careful script-edited nurturing must go on. I have commissioned about five script developments of which four will become, I hope, plays on television. Then I hope I can say I have set a cornerstone in TV drama.

Can you give me some idea of the stories?

They inevitably want to tackle the lives of ordinary people, with retrospective history in the background. Most of them are sociological tracts, and that's a danger, but I have to live with it to start with. The drama of settlement is their subject.

Haven't you already marked that in your own work?

Come to Mecca? I think they feel it's too soft. Obviously I should have written something else. But one forgets one's own work and starts where the writer is. If I started where the audience was, I'd get nowhere.

My second strand is that, as I said about India, I want British companies to examine issues in Africa which will be local but will become in a sense metaphors for the whole of a nation. The one idea I'm quite stuck on will be made by

a Ghanaian film editor who wants to direct his first film. He has directed for Ghanaian television. He is passionate about one subject, the removal of his tribe to build a dam because, as he claims, officials in newly independent Ghana were keen on international finance and prestige. But the ideas had not been thought through and the dam never worked out. Just through this one dam, and its story, one can maybe generalise about the developmental problems without making it an Open University programme.

If you wanted to put money into a drama project written abroad, would you be able to?

I don't have the money, say, to make a feature film in Africa. Basically, I have to look after the multicultural and multinational interests of Britain, which means the new communities of Britain, and in the first year I refused many strong black American ideas to concentrate on black British ones.

And what about the proportion of documentary to drama coming from your department?

The bread and butter of minority television today has to be magazines and documentary. Drama is expensive. As soon as I can colonise some more money, I shall use it for large dramatic ventures. There are several crying out to be done, such as *The Black Jacobins*. It will be as thrilling as *Jewel in the Crown* and it will cost about six million pounds.

Turning to your own writing for television, what is your forthcoming series *King of the Ghetto* about?

It draws on my involvement in the East End. I was sent there as a political activist and I became involved in the lives of Bangladeshis there, in the squatting movement. That was in the late

1970s. The story is set in the mid-80s and so it brings in some later developments in the Asian communities. It involves the struggle between two or three sorts of power in a place in which the normal formations of power in Britain do not exist. So all the panoply of British democratic method is not present, right in the heart of a British city. A white adventurer comes along and gets the Bangladeshis involved in a squatting movement and becomes their leader. He gets bloated with his power. At the same time a Bangladeshi businessman is rising, through wanting the Islamicisation of a school which is suggested to him by a white teacher. He wants to be the first Bengali MP through the community's votes. The community doesn't even know that it votes. It doesn't know that it squats. It works and exists.

How much is this just an expansion of your *Come to Mecca* film *Salt on a Snake's Tail*?

King has a complexity far beyond the cliché of the interaction between racists and Bangladeshis. Even Hanif Kureishi couldn't get away from that. You take the most obvious interface and dramatise it. None of *King* is obvious at all. The community gets hold of a school which is to be closed down. But the only reason they win against the national politicians and socialist NLEA politicians is that someone fixes a racist attack in order to make it a national issue.

Is there humour in it?

I hope so. After all, I did write *Tandoori Nights*. It's also a thriller; people get beaten up, places get burned down. You don't know what happened. There are several of the surprises of plot that television needs; it's not sociology. It's Boys from the Currystuff. ■

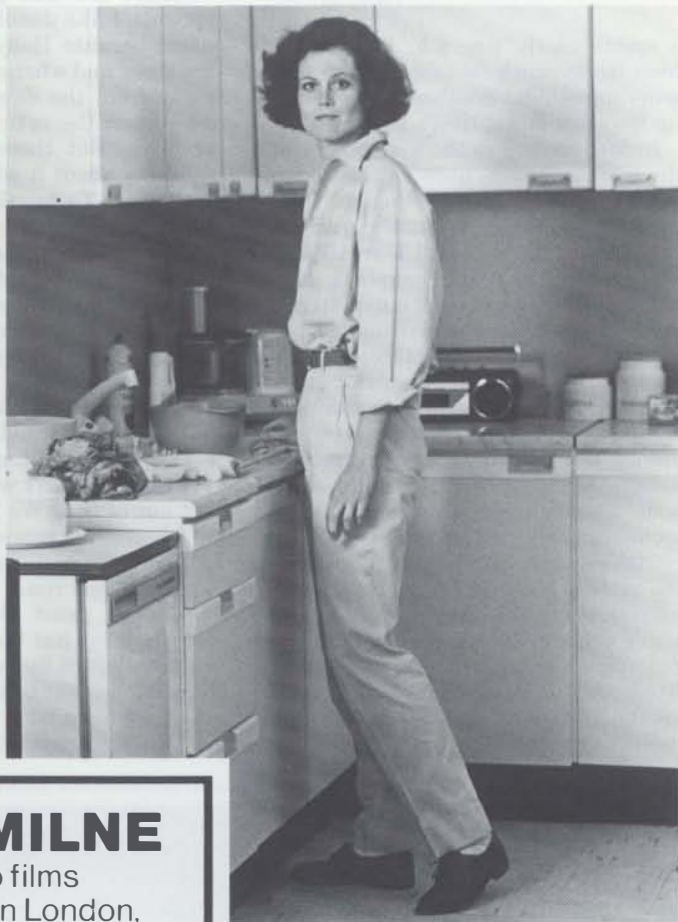
King of the Ghetto: Ian Durie and Zia Mohyeddin.



KIDNAPPERS



Paul Mayersberg's *Heroine*: Hiro Arai, Irina Brook (in bath), Corinne Daela.



Bob Swaim's *Half Moon Street*: Sigourney Weaver.

TOM MILNE

on two films
shooting in London,
Paul Mayersberg's *Heroine*
and Bob Swaim's
Half Moon Street.

Heroine

A girl is kidnapped, and her wealthy father held to ransom, by a small group of young, well-heeled, amateur terrorists. With the bizarre admixture of romance and violence that ensues, it's *No Orchids for Miss Blandish* again, or perhaps *Sanctuary*, the Faulkner novel from which James Hadley Chase lifted his plot. Only not quite. Think of *Les Enfants Terribles*, of *Rebel Without a Cause*: rich kids (in this case no longer teenagers) who have everything and nothing and are desperately trying to build something of their own.

At the Royal Victoria Docks, somewhere down in the wilds of London's East End beyond Limehouse and Poplar,

Paul Mayersberg is busy turning a script of his own, an original, into his first film as a director. One of the founding quartet of *Movie* magazine, Mayersberg has come up by way of a select list of credits: assistant to Jean-Pierre Melville (*Le Doulos*), Roger Corman (*The Tomb of Ligeia*), Joseph Losey (*The Servant*); screenwriter for Nicolas Roeg on *The Man Who Fell to Earth* and *Eureka*, author of a script filmed as *The Disappearance* by Stuart Cooper, script collaborator on Oshima's *Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence*. There was also, back in 1972, a less happy experience on Conrad Rooks' *Siddhartha*, where a belated revelation that the

Hesse estate would insist on total fidelity to the novel left Mayersberg's script—complete with revisions unavoidable if the book was to be filmed—on the shelf aside from a line or two of dialogue.

The setting for *Heroine*—or principal setting, since others include Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill, standing in as a baronial home—is an abandoned warehouse on the docks that have been gently rotting away into a wasteland since all shipping activity was shunted down river to Tilbury. 'I want it to look like a ship,' Mayersberg mutters while preparing to set up a night shot of the exterior with his cameraman Mike Southon, here making his feature debut and serving as both lighting cameraman and operator. And by all accounts doing

& SEDUCTRESSES

KIDNAPPERS

& SEDUCTRESSES

a spectacularly fine job. Where, aside from his tv work (notably on the *Arena* programme), did Southon come from? A tip from Nic Roeg, that's where.

Inside, serving as the kidnappers' lair, the warehouse has been left as its bare-walled, crumbling self, though with a car perched bizarrely on the encircling gallery, and on one wall a small mural representing an old monoplane diving into an orange sun rising out of an azure sea. Where this mural came from or what it means is something the film apparently never explains. But it may have something to do with the kamikaze end met by the Japanese member of the kidnap trio (Hiro Arai in another movie debut). A premonition, perhaps, in the way that Roeg incorporates such moments within his mosaic style?

'Not exactly. Apart from the fact that the style is Nic's anyway, it would work against me in this film because in a way it's a dream. That sounds pretentious, but it's a dream in the sense that it's unreal, and with too much cutting you create something which is not quite dreamlike. And this film, for which I

wanted a strong plot, a *lurid* plot the audience would recognise and which would allow me to do other things, is one with longer takes where you watch things which are sometimes horrendous and sometimes lyrical, but without distinction in the way they are shot. Some of the most violent things are shot, in the most lyrical way, and some of the lyrical ones very abruptly.

'There are also going to be a lot of opticals. I like dissolves, which got a bad name because Hollywood used them all the time, and whenever a film was taken away from the director to be cut, that was when the optical department went to work. But there is another way of thinking about it which is more like the Russians—Tarkovsky, say—and this is to unite elements of the place and the face. I have a scene where the heroine (Irina Brook, daughter of Peter) is in jail: she looks up in her cell, and over her, smiling at her, is an angel. The angel is herself in superimposition, herself in a shot from the end of the film that is almost but not quite the same. There is no way you could get that sense of *protection* by editing. It's as if the shot were saying don't worry, you're going to get out of this. We know that what she will become is protecting her already.'

There are of course *connections* of the kind one has come to expect from Roeg films, not least the two scripted by Mayersberg. But they are evoked rather by parallels in the settings. Being static, already present in the way the sets and their contents were designed and in the way colour is used, these connections are

established without cutting. Which is one reason for Mayersberg's choice as art director of Voytek, a designer mainly known for theatre work. *Heroine* is a film where the characters basically make their own worlds as they go, creating their own environments. This is evident from the warehouse 'set'. At one end, like some moonstruck lake, a stagnant pool of water remaining from some forgotten leakage. In the middle, dominating everything else, the huge white box in which the heroine is imprisoned. And dotted about, orderly but seemingly random—remember Paul building his own private space out of bedclothes and screens in *Les Enfants Terribles*, a film that is a constant touchstone for Mayersberg?—are domestic islands founded on duckboards, unscreened from each other yet somehow intensely private: a bed, a mattress, bath, toilet and stove, tv and video, telephone, forming the sort of theoretical interiors you find in the furniture departments of big stores.

Most regular art directors being 'what are called repro men in the business', Mayersberg chose Voytek as a designer more likely to grasp the idea and then find a way to express it in the sets. Uncertain during the planning stages who was going to photograph the film, and reluctant to rely on the hypothetical skills of his cameraman to get him through in six weeks, he was determined that the *images* would already be present in the sets. In the event, no problem, since Mayersberg is more than delighted with Mike Southon's work.

The warehouse set for *Heroine*: white box, duckboards and domestic islands.



But watching director and cameraman setting up a variety of shots in the warehouse, a striking common denominator became evident: the angles, on this day at least, suggested an Ozu-like two inches off the ground viewpoint. Partly explained, perhaps, by the fact that duckboards make low foundations for furnishings. More so by technical requirements in preserving the keynotes of fantasy. But above all by the presence of a strong Japanese element in the film.

'Long before *Merry Christmas*, Mr Lawrence, I was fascinated by Japanese thinking. It's so much a reverse of the way we think, such a wonderful corrective, that I'll try all the time to play scenes in a Japanese way, sometimes visually and sometimes not. For instance, the idea that you can have eroticism without nudity, which in the West would be regarded as either fetishism or some kind of prohibition. The Japanese have no reverence for the human body, thinking it—like nature—extremely ugly. I do have scenes of nudity in *Heroine*, male and female, but what I was trying for was not eroticism but a certain childishness—you know, the sort of childlike behaviour in which nudity is not an issue, you forget whether you are wearing clothes while you have that row. The way the audience perceives it, of course... well, that's a social problem.

'But if you go on from the Japanese lack of reverence for the human body, you come to their admiration for the manner of death. We want to stay alive at all costs. The Japanese want to die correctly. We don't want to choose the moment of our death, we think there is something sick about that. The Japanese would think that if you *don't* choose the moment of your death, you are living in disorder. There is a sort of love story in *Heroine*, but for him (Hiro Arai) not for her (Irina Brook). Neither of them understands, not language, just motives. At one point he gives her a kimono, which is a wedding kimono. She says thank you very much and gives him a big kiss. As far as he's concerned they're married, but for her it's just very nice. So in effect there are two parallel stories. One in which Japanese audiences will see a sort of cautionary tale saying don't fool around with the West, it will destroy you. One in which Western audiences will see the travails of a girl who is kidnapped by a loony Jap who seems to want her but never explains. When he dies, the European way of looking at it would be that he is escaping into death. The Japanese would see it as a moment of reality, the moment when he came to his senses.'

The whole film, Mayersberg insists, is unreal—a French word useful in defining the climate of films as far apart as *Les Yeux sans Visage* and *Les Enfants Terribles*—because he didn't want to get into areas of social explanation that were none of his purpose. For the same reason, his characters are chic (in the sense, perhaps, that *Diva* was chic), not just because they come from wealthy backgrounds, but because they are not



Paul Mayersberg, script supervisor Diana East and producer Don Boyd.

real like the Palestinian terrorists who so fascinate us all ('There's a razor now that will shave your beard, leaving four millimetres of stubble'). They are not even imitations but something else again, and are finally caught not through police methods but by a psychic. So, in a way, 'the film itself is the box', though not in the sense that it literally starts immured with the heroine. Actually it is planned to open on a close-up of an eye, seemingly dead until it flickers and opens, and the camera pulls back and back, revealing that the eye belongs to a girl in bed, that she is not alone, that she is expecting a visitor about whom she is obviously nervous, that a lurking Japanese is watching from outside, 'so that little by little it's already a strange world.' But the film is the box in that 'you go into it and then you come out ninety minutes later, changed or not changed.'

'An important aspect is that, although the story centres on three men and two women, all the characters are identified—in my mind anyway—as female or by their female aspects, which has nothing to do with being gay, far from it. I wanted to try to tell a story in which you did not have to be basically male and macho in order to be courageous. Broadly speaking, the difference between male and female courage seems to me to be that, for men, brave behaviour means sticking to your guns, following the

thing through to the bitter end. The American cinema has made a particular virtue of this. A woman's life is very different, and it doesn't really matter here whether it's for social or physiological reasons, or any of the things that feminists try to disentangle. The fact is that women's lives depend on change, on things from relationships and work to marriage, babies and growing old, that have far less evident impact on men. So for a woman to be brave, she must accept change, consciously, as she changes her lifestyle when she marries. Accept things or reject things, but always with a view to changing.

'Hence the film's title, *Heroine*, refers directly to the girl who is kidnapped, but also to the other characters in that they are all confronted by the same problem: when you decide to change your life, you're going to have to change. That change is severe and dramatic, and may make you or destroy you. In another sense the story has to do with what happens to people in terms of emotion, who they like, who they don't like. Almost like being children. You know how children can never really work out why they don't like someone or are attracted, and it's an odd mixture of physical similarities, sexuality, backgrounds. *Les Enfants Terribles* is the classic of that subject, of what causes these weird attractions and rejections, the establishing of *la chambre*.'

KIDNAPPERS &

Half Moon Street

Heroine, an Anglo-French co-production, marks the reappearance of Don Boyd as a producer following the two-year industry ostracism after his innocent involvement in a financial con resulted in the collapse of his ill-fated *Gossip* in 1983. *Half Moon Street* heralds the return of an even more remote ghost of movies past, since this adaptation of Paul Theroux's *Doctor Slaughter* is being filmed down at Elstree (now the EMI Studios) on behalf of RKO Pictures. But wasn't RKO as well and truly dead as Howard Hughes? Apparently not, although the ramifications of its sudden re-emergence—with a darkish thriller which hopefully intimates that it is also dragging its old persona Out of the Past—would probably take a book to sort out.

The Theroux novel, coincidentally once under brief consideration by Roeg and Mayersberg in a project which died over the question of rights, is one of those books up for filming about which everybody waxes somewhat apologetic. It is, assorted Theroux admirers assure me, very bad. 'Unfilmable pornography,' director Bob Swaim was told in Hollywood. Personally, I found it really rather good, although it isn't hard to see where the problems lie. Dr Slaughter (Sigourney Weaver in the film) is a beautiful 27-year-old American, a PhD in political economy with a specialist knowledge of China, who arrives in London to take up a job at an institute for international affairs, switches her attention to the Middle East, and simultaneously begins to pursue a calling as a high-class escort girl. What follows, on the one hand, is a series of coolly graphic sexual encounters; and on the other, equally dispassionately observed, an account of her sense of remaining—naively, innocently, consciously—in full control. The linking factor being that, since her encounters are most often with oil-rich Middle Eastern diplomats or tycoons with whom she can converse on an informed basis, her intelligence is involved along with her body.

Well aware of the pitfalls while writing his own adaptation in collaboration with Edward Behr (a *Newsweek* journalist), Bob Swaim is that com-



Half Moon Street: Michael Caine, Sigourney Weaver.

parative oddity, an American director whose feature credits to date read: *America 0*, *France 2*. Arriving in Paris to study social anthropology, he fell under the spell of cinema to such an extent at the Cinémathèque that he suddenly decided to switch tracks. Sensibly concluding that he didn't know *anything*, he opted for basic grounding by enrolling not at IDIEC but at Vaugirard, training as a cameraman and then working his way up the French industry ladder (on a bit of everything, mainly documentaries) from focus puller onwards. Awed by actors, he equally sensibly moonlighted for a couple of years at a Parisian offshoot of the Actors' Studio. 'It was a very valuable period, rehearsing actors, working with them, and gradually realising that they were just like anybody else.'

The benefits of that experience show clearly in the remarkable performances Swaim extracted, not just from Nathalie Baye, Philippe Léotard and Richard Berry, but from the entire cast in *La Balance*. Before that, though, came his

feature debut in 1977 with *La Nuit de Saint-Germain-des-Près*, a thriller recreating the mood and milieu of the 'existentialist' Latin Quarter in the early 1950s, and an eager contender in the retro/nostalgia stakes. By general consensus strong on atmosphere but weak on plot and allied interests (an assessment with which Swaim now agrees), it was fairly well received critically but flopped at the box-office. The four years before Swaim started work on *La Balance*, by hanging out with Parisian policemen for a year to ensure that his film knew what it was talking about, were the darkest of his life. 'Years during which my marriage broke up, I couldn't get work apart from a commercial now and again, I thought I'd never make another movie, and kept wondering who I was, trying to be a Frenchman making a French movie. I had to come to terms with the fact that I'm not a hundred per cent American, having lived out of the country for twenty years, and yet I'm not a Frenchman and never will be.'

SEDUCTRESSES

The results of this reappraisal are again immediately apparent in *La Balance*, a film in which Swaim feels the pacing may be closer to American cinema, the character and atmosphere more European. Above all, it reads like an outsider's inside view (or insider's outside view), an astonishingly accurate and remarkably dispassionate report on French flicdom which is all the more effective in that it resists all temptations to grind axes. ('Living with the cops, I had this conflict with myself: I deplored what they did as a group, and individually I liked them. I wondered how I could make the movie. Then I thought, the best way to do it is to show what I feel, that there is a conflict.') Perhaps because of his training as a social anthropologist, perhaps because of his peripatetic life (which started in the Midwest, continued all over America in the wake of a father whose job entailed constant moves, and later included a couple of years in Japan), Swaim is abnormally sensitive to places, likes to put a lot of texture into his films, and justifiably describes Paris as a character in *La Balance*. He hopes the same will be true of London in *Half Moon Street*, much of which was shot on location, although *Half Moon Street* itself ('the real one just wasn't very interesting') was created on the back lot at Elstree.

'When I was preparing *La Balance*, the cops wanted to show me exciting stuff, big stuff. What interested me were the little things they didn't even see because they took them for granted. When I came to London for this picture, again I just hung around, went to pubs, sat on benches, talked to people. I don't know if a Londoner would see the little, incongruous things that caught my eye and will creep into the atmosphere of the picture. As a character . . . I want you to perceive the city as Lauren Slaughter does, as a foreigner.

'When I first came to London in the 60s, just married, we were poor but the life was fat and easy. Then I came over during the 70s, and you could see changes, the energy crisis and so forth. But over the past few years what really surprised me was the violence. London has become a battleground, a battleground for terrorists. Class differences had kind of disappeared during the 60s, working-class people becoming pop stars and having lunch with princes. Now you feel anger, there's resentment, there's racism, and times are tough. The Iranian embassy, shoot-outs in the middle of London . . . God, ten years ago this was impossible. Policemen getting their throats cut, mobs jumping on people, this is anarchy and this is part of the picture. Unflattering to a city I love, maybe, as *La Balance* isn't always flattering to Paris, but it's how it was.'

One of the most pleasing things about *La Balance* was the delicately managed contrast between the eagle eye pin-pointing the milieu and the tender one observing the pimp and the prostitute, caught in a cruel rat trap, trying to preserve the purity of their love with a doomed fatalism worthy of Gabin and

Morgan in *Quai des Brumes*. The problem with Theroux's novel—one of the problems—is a certain lack of definition in the central character which makes it difficult to see Lauren Slaughter, and the dichotomy she seemingly fails to acknowledge between the two halves of her life, in any very precise way. This Swaim tackled in various ways, starting with a conviction that Lauren Slaughter should be presented as a woman totally consistent within herself. On *La Balance*, when Nathalie Baye asked him how to play a hooker, Swaim's response was, 'You don't play a hooker, you play a woman in love.' When Sigourney Weaver asked him whether she should talk to escort girls in preparing for her role, he suggested that instead she talk to people who had been in China. She did, and a background of disillusionment now offers a much more persuasive basis than the novel (which blithely waives reasons) for both her switch to the Middle East and her plunge into the escort business.

Further convinced that some sort of conflict was essential if one is to care about Lauren Slaughter, Swaim brought the character of Lord Bulbeck—an elderly politician, shadily and as it turns out dangerously involved in Middle Eastern politics, with whom Lauren has an escort relationship that evolves into a sort of granddaughterly affection—down in years to fit the casting of Michael Caine. The romantic involvement sounds dangerously stereotypical until one recalls the analogous relationship in *La Balance*. 'Both are attractive (Weaver and Caine), but this is not a

glamour girl/superstud thing. I wanted them to be attracted to each other because of *intelligence*.'

Interestingly, Swaim sees Lauren Slaughter in almost feminist terms, insisting that she never acts out of weakness, though there are hints of vulnerability in her relationships and a certain characteristically American naiveté ('You know . . . We can do anything, we can walk on the moon . . .'), and that she challenges hypocritical attitudes by approaching life in a manner that would be open to macho bragging were she male. There remains, nevertheless, the problem of the explicit sex scenes and their vulnerability to exploitation. But Swaim is proud of the fact that when *La Balance* suffered retroactive critical niggles after sweeping the French awards, Truffaut went out of his way to write him a reassuring letter, in particular expressing his admiration for the discreet yet never prudish way in which *La Balance* handled sex.

Swaim sees no problem. 'I de-emphasise that aspect of it, not from any puritanical reaction but because I find sex on the screen rather boring. My favourite "sexiest scene" is in Sternberg's *The Docks of New York*, where Betty Compson tries to commit suicide and is rescued by George Bancroft. When he carries her in she's all wet, he lays her on the bed, and slowly rolls down the wet black stockings. *This*, I thought, is sexy, and it's what film-making is all about. Never show too much. Suggest. Use shadows. What's offscreen is important too, noises, the rustle of silk, the sound of a zipper. So . . .'

Bob Swaim (standing) directing a London Underground scene.





A Room with a View

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Oxford, 12 September, British Film Year. Eroica St John Mildmay, wearing a black sequined dress, casts a professional eye over an actress in a large suit of flannel pyjamas. The actress waits patiently. An actor lying on a bed pulls a blanket over his head. Even on a two-handed scene, being videoed as a no-frills film-making exercise, there are the customary delays. The sun beats. The setting is the balcony of the Merton Boat House; the players, however, must imagine themselves in Africa. Eroica goes determinedly indoors. (She has, I'm told, modelled for *Vogue*; but she's here now as one of the winners of the Oxford Film Foundation's 1984 screenwriting competition.) Charles Sturridge, among whose credits is *Brideshead Revisited*, instructs the actor and actress in a scene from Eroica's *Roman Holiday*. Eroica re-emerges in what can best be described as a canary-coloured tea-towel. Would the actress look better in this, she asks. There might, the camera operator Bob Goodliffe says, be a slight problem of continuity.

The Oxford Film Foundation's screenwriting competition is now in its second year. It is open to unproduced writers under the age of 26, though next time the limit is to be raised. Lloyds Bank offers £15,000 of development money as a first prize. The winner and six runners-up spend a week in Oxford: professional film-makers go over their scripts, scenes are videoed and edited. Billeted in a deserted Merton College, under the watchful eye of the college servants, who have their hours, students and teachers are falling to with a will. Everyone, it seems, writes scripts. Some two hundred were submitted in 1984: the foundation's officers picked a short list, David Puttnam chose the winners.

Although the prize-money is a tempting carrot, no one I speak to has any expectations that real investment money can be picked from bushes, or indeed that a couple of afternoons with a luminary such as Charles Sturridge will somehow magic their script into the ABC Fulham Road. *Roman Holiday* (a man,



Oxford tutorial: script consultant Julian Bond, Eroica St John Mildmay.

The Coming Tide

JOHN PYM

two women, entanglements) didn't, for example, start with a formula, a hazy notion of what might in some vague way sell. Eroica St John Mildmay had strong

feelings about Africa. She grew up there, believes that if a film could catch what she instinctively knows about the continent (and none so far has), that film would be worth watching. She's not sure she has written the great African film; she is, however, beginning to

Left: Charles Sturridge.

Right: observers Al Clark and Verity Lambert. Oxford photographs: Ed Ironside.



see her way through the pampas-grass.

Has she been happy working with directors such as Sturridge and Peter Duffell? Half and half; there were times when she felt herself in the presence of the great white god. In an ideal world she wished they had been the equivalent of nursing whales, gently edging their offspring to the surface. On the briefest of acquaintances (about three minutes), she displays one immediately impressive talent. She can vividly tell a story. She could, I'm sure, convince a rhino-skinned moneyman that hers was the most important story in the world, and that it would be a privilege for him to invest in the picture. Hang continuity errors! I believe there is this African story waiting to be made. 'Look,' she says, pointing to the faded white wall of the boat house, 'see that light switch, if we were in Africa, the surround would be absolutely filthy. People don't know these things.'

To lunch with Isabel Wallace: why had she entered the competition? She'd seen an advertisement. Her boyfriend had been despatched to the bank manager for an application form. The bank manager gave the boyfriend an idea. This was brought back together with the form and became *George's Account*. Wasn't it unwise of the bank manager to have divulged a confidence about one of his clients? (He had an old lady, apparently, who just didn't know what to do with her money, who on earth to give it to.) 'If you knew my boyfriend,' Isabel says, 'you'd understand. People tell him things.' This was her first script. At present she has a job serving in a gift shop in London's Soho.

What of the others? Michael Hasselmo is a Rhodes Scholar, an experimental psychologist from Harvard. His screenplay, *Making It*, is set against the riot-torn summer of 1981 and was based on one of his three (unpublished) novels. There are two young men: the upper-class one is going down in the world, the lower-class one is rising. David Collier, whose *Tumbling Resolutions* is a comedy about an attempt at assisted suicide,



Film-maker Marisa Silver with seminar director Rupert Walters.

works for a stockshot company; and Antonio Centurion, whose *White Rabbit* has Howard Hughes coming to the rescue of a crashed flying submarine, was a former film school student.

I am not able to discover what exactly Hans Odd's *Kolyma* is about. It began as a story about a male guard arriving at a Siberian prison camp staffed by women. Its author, however, a 17-year-old pupil from Manchester Grammar School, has completely rewritten the script (the title's changed too) in a couple of days of white-hot activity following the first sobering story consultation. The overall winner is Kevin Scouler, who is studying writing and direction at the National Film and Television School: his *Lewis of the Bear* is about darts rivalry and two Northern pubs. With the success of darts on television, surely there's a bankable film here. The selling, however, comes later; this week, the participants seem content simply to learn. Patience is the first virtue of the film industry.

Rupert Walters, the seminar director, is full of agreeable enthusiasm. As a student, he was a *Brideshead* extra and

Advising in Oxford. Left: editor Tom Priestley. Right: Charles Sturridge, Susanna White and Bob Goodliffe at Merton Boat House.

involved on the fringes of *Heaven's Gate*; more recently, he was script editor and second-unit director on *Restless Natives*, Ninian Dunnett's Scottish comedy about two modern highwaymen, which won the 1983 competition and went on to become a feature made by Thorn EMI in association with the foundation's own production company. The competition, he believes, has the simple virtue of being a good idea. There is nothing else quite like it in Britain. The editor Tom Priestley, who has taught at the NFTS, backs this up. Thorn EMI is underwriting the seminar week with £21,000, and the government's Business Incentive Scheme is bumping this up to around £30,000. No one is drawing a salary: the participants, part and full-time, include Bill Bryden, Jack Rosenthal, Verity Lambert, Linda Agran, Bruce Robinson, Al Clark, Marisa Silver, Irvin Kershner, John Schlesinger. The industry has chipped in with reduced equipment rental charges. Budweiser has contributed 1,200 cans of beer. Robert Redford's Sundance Institute, founded in Utah in 1980, was the foundation's model and has given practical help.

London, 26 September. To the British Academy of Film and Television Arts for the annual Fuji Film Awards. More continuity hiccups: I'm presented with two clip-on identity badges neither of which manages to get my name right. An atmosphere of great excitement. The critics who congregate around the BAFTA bar before smart magazine shows can usually be recognised by their long faces: another sort of patient resignation. Today the audience actually seems keen to get into the show.

The Fuji Film Scholarships, modest cash prizes (£400 maximum) in a number of categories for shorts made by colleges offering film courses, were launched in 1981, when they attracted two entries. In 1985 sixteen colleges submitted films. Each was supplied with 1,600ft of Fuji colour stock, Zonal soundtrack and free processing. The films must be not less than ten minutes





The Fuji Film Awards. Mr Harushi Yagi and David Puttnam with the winners from Plymouth College of Art and Design.

and not more than fifteen. The Japanese notion of sponsorship, however, as the managing director of Fuji Photo Film (UK), Harushi Yagi, points out, is not hazard free. Mr Yagi persuaded head office in Tokyo to sponsor the tennis player Gabriela Sabatini (he had been much impressed by her beauty and power at Wimbledon). If she does not reach top rank in three years, he adds with a laugh, which sounds genuine but might be nervous, he is in danger of losing face. The winners of the Fuji scholarships, by implication, bear a heavy responsibility.

David Puttnam, just back from five months in Colombia with the team shooting *The Mission*, which is being produced by his company Enigma, is full of agreeable enthusiasm. This enthusiasm, however, has been tested in fire. He speaks without notes: a relaxed ease before the camera. He remarks that he is going to America for a year's sabbatical: going back to school to discover, perhaps, that he hasn't missed what he never had. He opens with a few words on David Harlech and his influence on the course of film censorship in Britain; he recalls in the 60s one terrible month when he had three major censorship battles running. Puttnam

does not say what they were, but the audience sits up and pays attention.

A vice-president of British Film Year, a governor of the Film School, David Puttnam bangs away at old themes: narrative cinema is what we are good at (apologies to those of you who want to be documentarists); cinema is the medium for the transfer of dreams; 12 and 13-year-olds will soon be able to read films as they now read books. He makes a gratifying reference to a marvellous article in a BFI publication in which Wajda claims cinema is the twentieth century heir to the novel. A general practitioner said to me recently that her chief job was to comfort her patients; curing their ailments was another matter altogether. Puttnam is a great and good comforter.

The films themselves are full of zip. Third prize goes to Bristol University's *One of Us*, an adaptation of an incident from one of Christopher Isherwood's diaries. Britain in the 30s: the vindictive immigration officer of the title refuses entry to a young German whose handsome young lover has come to meet him.

Making *Child's Play*. Left: Paul Maxwell, Johnny Rutherford, Simon Springett Right: Johnny Rutherford, Alex Cooper and Karl Murphy.

Open and fastidious, the film has a sense of history: there was a time, believe it or not, before Gay Liberation. St Martin's School of Art took second prize with *The Ladies Room*. A group of raucous squabbling teenagers take refuge in a club powder room. Puttnam praises the spontaneity of the performances. He would have liked his name on the credits: you cannot, surely, say this too often and still remain credible. Nicolas Roeg had advised dirtying the mirrors for authenticity.

The runaway winner, however, is *Child's Play* from the Plymouth College of Art and Design. It also takes the Steenback, Arriflex and Zonal awards for editing, camerawork and sound-recording. The picture—a troubled man, fixed in childhood, has never recovered from the trauma of having witnessed his mother's murder—is a model of technical proficiency: superimpositions, time cross-overs, flashes of the past. The writer-director is Paul Maxwell, the producer Alex Cooper, the cameraman Simon Springett, the sound recordist Greg Alexander and the editor Johnny Rutherford. The latter, it's revealed, added some pulsating-floor effects, which were highly praised by the judges, simply to make up the running time: such is art. Caps are thrown into the air in the front stalls.

Puttnam prefaces the awards presentation: he knows something about winning, he is a world expert on losing. Losing is easier, you don't have to lie. The pain wears off. Mike McCloy, senior lecturer in film at Plymouth, is clearly no loser: his efforts over the years are justly commended. The business of teaching film-making is patted on the back. The film-makers leave for a decent buffet lunch, not a hole in the corner affair with curled sandwiches and a beer around the corner, which is what, Puttnam recalls, you got at the early National Film School screenings. Far off days! Later the students troop into the sunshine of Piccadilly, mindful, one hopes, of Mr Yagi's delicate relationship with top management in Tokyo. ■



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On the selection of their films for the

29th London Film Festival

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Orson Welles' last film, *Fake, or F for Fake*.

Orson

A mark of the romantic hero—perhaps the mark of the romantic hero—is a powerful belief in his own destiny. Orson Welles certainly had that. At one time, he saw Hollywood as merely a detour on the route to the White House (and it must have amused him to see who did finally make that journey). It was, I suppose, this sense of a life unfinished, some appointment with destiny never kept, that made his death last October seem surprising and even shocking, as well as saddening.

There should have been no real surprise. Welles was seventy, after all, and for years he must have been overtaxing his heart. It was more than a decade since he had made a picture (the marvellous *Fake*); in spite of optimistic rumours of projects in the offing (*King Lear*, *The Cradle Will Rock*), few of us would probably have quite believed in a new Welles picture until we saw it on the screen. Yet, for all that, expectation remained: that the heroic destiny should, and still could, yield one more late masterpiece. And now, 'Falstaff is dead; And we must yearn therefore.'

I encountered him only three times—trivial incidents, worth remembering and recording merely because each seemed so fittingly Wellesian. The first time was years ago at a Venice festival. My employers had asked me to catch up with him, if I could, to clear some detail about permission for a screening. They

were not optimistic that I could pin down the most elusive man in cinema. Nor was I, though I dutifully left notes and telephone messages, and made detours between film shows to hang about in a despondent way outside his hotel. After a week of this, a routine chore was turning into an obsessive quest. Then, late one night, actually about one in the morning, I spotted Welles across the lounge of the Excelsior. I went over, introduced myself and explained my errand. He was immensely genial and entirely businesslike. This was no time to discuss the thing in detail, but if I would present myself at his hotel at nine that morning, we could quickly sort it out. Eight hours later, I duly arrived... Mr Welles, said the concierge, had checked out at 6 a.m. One could not even begin to feel aggrieved. This had so evidently been an encounter with Mr Arkadin.

Ten months later, on holiday in the south of France, I was idling around the port at Antibes. We had just noted the presence of the Korda yacht, then a fairly regular feature on that coast, when we saw a curious little procession creeping towards us. In front came Sir Alex, a frail and elderly figure, supported and to some extent propelled by Lady Korda. Behind them, at a few yards distance, slowly marched Orson Welles. He was dressed in black, in what might have passed for a vaguely seafaring rig (*The Lady from Shanghai*?), except that the way he towered over the little Kordas, and the precise distance he seemed to be maintaining between them

and himself, rather suggested some demon butler in a horror film. Astonishingly, as they drew level, he waved, called a greeting, seemed quite prepared to resume negotiations where we had left them off. Then Sir Alex looked impatiently over his shoulder, and the procession moved on.

The third occasion was in 1983, when Welles was lured to Cannes. He remained, as usual, incommunicado; then one morning there he was, sitting on the Carlton terrace, seeming to overflow two or even three chairs, or perhaps merely occupying one outsize wheelchair, and surrounded by an entourage of predictable festival faces. There was a small, orderly queue. Patient, affable, and positively radiating goodwill, Orson Welles was signing autographs. Should one introduce oneself, buttonhole one of the entourage? Might one even contemplate joining the autograph queue? The appointment I had to keep seemed rather more pressing. Forty minutes later, when I walked by again, he was still there. Foolishly, I walked on.

And now, what? Has Welles after all left us a legacy? There's *The Deep*, the thriller with Laurence Harvey, embarked on many years ago. There's the legendary *Don Quixote* and *The Other Side of the Wind*, and the fragment of an Isak Dinesen story, *The Dreamers*. Let us hope that, in whatever state these films may be, they aren't buried with him; that the credits may roll again, even if the magical voice no longer tells us 'My name is Orson Welles...'

News story

On a Friday evening back in September, the BBC's *Nine O'Clock News* carried an intriguing item: some two dozen Chaplin shorts, unknown and previously unrecorded, had turned up in California; some of them carried 'experimental soundtracks'; and the American Film Institute, it was indicated, had more or less authenticated the find. It seemed, perhaps, a little too good to be true, although after the recent discovery of Dreyer's original *Joan of Arc* in a Norwegian lunatic asylum, nothing in this area could be entirely surprising. It was too good to be true, as anyone who has wondered why there was no follow up to the story may have guessed.

Earlier that day, I was telephoned from Canada by a friend in a state of some excitement. He had picked up the Chaplin story on an American news broadcast. It might not speedily cross the Atlantic, and he wanted to be sure that David Robinson and Kevin Brownlow were immediately informed. I duly passed on the news, which was greeted by both of them with extreme and instant scepticism. Two dozen shorts, Kevin Brownlow pointed out, represented about two years output for Chaplin: it was simply not on the cards that so much work, in such a documented life, could have slipped out of sight. But he promised to check out the story. Let him take over:

'I telephoned the American Film Institute in California and talked to Bob Rosen. He was quick to disillusion me. "Oh, no, nothing has been found of any value. There were just some two-reeler Chaplin reissues of the 30s with bad soundtracks—together with some Asian films." How did the story get out? "The fellow who owns the building wants the other films dug up." Apparently, rubble from a restaurant that had been demolished was taken to a garbage tip and covered with earth by bulldozers. Buried in it were many more cans of film. No one knows what was in them. And no one is going to spend thousands of dollars digging them up unless they imagine them to be valuable.

'The BBC headlined the "find" that evening on the nine o'clock news. I telephoned the news desk and warned them that the story was much exaggerated. "That's not what our reporter says. He spent several hours talking to Washington this morning." (The AFI headquarters is in Washington.) I urged them to scrap the story until they could check with Bob Rosen. "It's too late," they said.

'Twenty-five minutes later, as the final item in the news, came the story: not only were we told that the Chaplin films had never been seen before, we were informed that they had been made before the coming of talkies, equipped

with "experimental soundtracks". An interview with Bob Rosen was used to support this theory, even though he only talked about the volatile nature of nitrate. And then we were treated to an extract—a miserable dupe of *The Bank* (1915) with a typical reissue soundtrack of the 1930s...

The BBC man on the spot (a general news reporter and no film expert) no doubt believed what he was told; there were good back-up pictures of the restaurant and the rubbish tip; and the figure in the film extract was undeniably Chaplin. So is a news story made. Kevin Brownlow points to a nice irony: *The Unknown Chaplin*, the fascinating series which he made with David Gill and which contains any amount of rare, previously unknown Chaplin footage, has still not been shown on American television.

Stamp collection

A few years ago, Quincannon, then incumbent of this column, wrote admiringly about a set of Swedish postage stamps based on film stills. He wondered whether Britain could compete. A SIGHT AND SOUND reader took up the challenge: Will Hay, Olivier in *Hamlet*, the lovers under the railway arch in *Brief Encounter*, *Fires Were Started*, Orson Welles spotlighted in the doorway in *The Third Man*. His design was a quick, rough and ready mock-up; but they did look like stamps and, even more, they looked like British cinema.

When we finally got some film stamps, for British Film Year, they were rather different: portraits by distinguished (British) photographers of Chaplin, Hitchcock, David Niven, Peter Sellers

and Vivien Leigh. There's nothing wrong with the stamps, which are elegant and rather pretty. But what they don't convey is much, if anything, about British films. One of the British Film Year people I spoke to said that they had been a little upset that there wasn't a more up to date relevance, until they learned that to appear on a stamp you have to be safely dead. Another BFF official expressed total satisfaction: the five were powerful ambassadors for Britain in the international film world. All the same, it would have been nice if even one of the five had been an authentically home-grown figure, who had not owed the greater part of an international reputation to Hollywood.

The Post Office seems a little coy about the whole question of how a particular subject ends up on a stamp. Yes, there are consultations, but they would rather not tell you precisely how these are arranged, or who was consulted. Why not film stills? Because, it's suggested, the reproduction on such a small scale would probably not have been up to the PO standard—though the Swedes seem to have managed it adequately. But if stills are ruled out, and living people, it does in fact become more difficult than one might expect to think of anyone who could be called a household name, and who made a career exclusively, or even mainly, in British cinema. Any suggestions?

Marilyn

Having read the last chapter of *Goddess*, Anthony Summers' book about Marilyn Monroe, if only in a truncated newspaper serialisation, and heard Mr Summers marshalling his arguments at

Lauren Bacall and Hjordis Niven inspecting the Niven stamp.



a press conference, I was prepared to believe that any amount of hanky-panky had gone on in Los Angeles on the night Marilyn died. At the least, there was probably fudging of the evidence, including transporting the poor corpse around the place in an ambulance so that she would be found dead in her own bed. But after watching *Marilyn Monroe: Say Goodbye to the President*, Christopher Olgiati's BBC documentary, I don't feel quite so sure.

This has less to do with the evidence presented (much the same in both cases, with Mr Summers also involved in the film) than with the film's approach, in a style of which there are many recent examples. Television documentary, it seems, is going through a phase where it's thought a bit boring to sit witnesses in front of a camera, present what they have to say in a way which allows audiences to judge their credibility, as well as their evidence, and tie the investigation up with strictly relevant visual material. In the Monroe film, as in many others, interviews are chopped and filleted like the ingredients of a *nouvelle cuisine* salad: a snippet popped in here, another bit of flavouring there, broken up with assorted library footage — Marilyn in the swimming pool in *Something's Got to Give*, a speech by JFK, Bobby Kennedy's assassination. Everything somehow begins to look slightly suspect, but it's hard to see the evidence for the trees.

All the same, an inevitably intriguing film, if only because its supporting cast, former private detectives and the like, reeked so strongly of old-fashioned B-pictures. The Grand Jury has now called for yet another investigation of Marilyn Monroe's death; and Mr Summers at his press conference read out a list of people he would like to see officially questioned. The 'Holy Grail of this story,' in his rather unappetising phrase, would be a tape with some record of Marilyn's last telephone calls, which is thought to have existed and still perhaps does exist. Even in the early 60s, it would seem, everyone was bugging everyone else.

Desert island

Nicolas Roeg is not a director one would associate with that aged publicity standby, the year-long search for a leading lady. But an invitation to meet Amanda Donohoe, chosen to star in *Castaway* after just such a search, took me to the *Elizabethan*, a boat moored at Charing Cross Pier, to find out what had taken Roeg so long. In the event, Nicolas Roeg didn't put in an appearance; neither, for a while, did anyone else.

The press conference was called for 11 a.m. I arrived at 11.20, to find a few reporters and a dozen or so photographers, the latter sitting about in that dejected, almost comatose way peculiar



Amanda Donohoe (left) with Lucy Irvine, author of *Castaway*.

to their trade. The *Elizabethan* rocked gently; the only sport was watching publicity people making telephone calls, which by 11.40 were looking rather wild, from a phone on the jetty. It didn't seem to augur well, for a picture dealing with the skills handy in desert island life, that the star was apparently having such difficulty in navigating the half mile or so from the Drury Lane Hotel.

At 11.50 Miss Donohoe arrived, slightly flustered, and towed along by Lucy Irvine, writer of the book *Castaway*, whom she will be playing in the film. Oliver Reed (not present) plays the man whose *Time Out* advertisement for a desert island companion Lucy Irvine answered, and with whom she found out that islands, lagoons and coral reefs are not all they're cracked up to be. The photographers spring into action. Lucy Irvine strikes such effortlessly professional poses, draped over the ship's rail, that her agent, with whom I've been idly chatting, mutters that perhaps he should think about getting her modelling assignments. Miss Irvine has now written a book called *Runaway*, about the events that led her to *Castaway*.

Lucy Irvine, fairly glittering with determination, talks about infected cuts from the coral, sores, emaciation (Oliver Reed, it's reported, is already in weight-losing training), near-starvation. Amanda Donohoe, though evidently game for anything, perhaps wilts slightly as the catalogue continues. It is suggested that even the film experience (forthcoming locations in the Cook Islands) might turn out to be a little too close for comfort to the real thing. An unexpected choice of subject for Nicolas Roeg, going from the four-hander of *Insignificance*, in its highly urban setting, to this virtual two-hander in the middle of nowhere. Until, that is, one thinks back to the Australian desert of *Walkabout*. I leave as Miss Irvine is saying, 'And by this time, of course, we could scarcely crawl...'

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'Film Sales Shock: Myer ankles BFI for C4.' Carole Myer's lifelong dream was to get her name in a *Variety* headline alongside 'ankle' as the verb. When she did switch from selling British Film Institute Production Board films around the world to being head of film sales for Channel 4, she got a *Variety* article but not the headline. The least I can do is give the lady what she wanted.

Born and raised in Chicago, Carole Myer moved to this country some seventeen years ago, exactly one week after Mayor Daley chased the demonstrators out of the Democratic Convention and instigated what famously became known as the 'police riot'. She was in fact on her way to Russia, a place which she had always wanted to visit, but found that, while en route in England, it was easy for her to gain work papers. Apparently it was considered rather chic about that time for an English boss to have an American secretary, and so that is what she became. Shortly after she arrived in Britain, the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia. Carole Myer became secretary to the head of the Regional Department at the BFI on April Fool's Day 1976. One year later she was assistant to Hilary Thompson at the BFI Production Division. She never did make it to Russia.

She did not in fact initiate the sales department at the BFI. The office was formed after a longish series of articles in the *Sunday Times* from Philip Oakes, which had begun by taking up the cause of *Pressure* when director Horace Ové wanted it blown up to 35mm and considered himself generally hard done by, and had then gone on to criticise the BFI generally for making all those feature films but then not selling them properly so that we could all see them. Apparently the then director of the BFI, Keith Lucas, had a habit of going literally speechless when angry, and Carole Myer recalled long silent Mondays after the previous day's column from Oakes.

In due course Hilary Thompson was brought in to start up a film sales section. Unfortunately this entailed covering every aspect, from distribution in the UK to foreign sales, a Herculean task from which, unsurprisingly, the lady eventually resigned. From having been a secretary, Carole Myer had been drafted in as Hilary Thompson's assistant. 'The first time I went to Cannes, everyone at the BFI said to me, "What are you going to Cannes for? No one will want to buy a BFI movie." It was *really* encouraging.

'My first sale ever was to Yugoslavia. I had no *idea* of what I should be doing. No one had told me what sort of prices I should be asking, so I just named a figure off the top of my head and the poor Yugoslav woman fainted. She'd been used to something rather lower.' In fact this is a problem encountered by most people in this line of work. You don't exactly come across many government training schemes on how to be a film salesman. One famous buyer went out in the usual state of ignorance, only to have the seller take pity on him and start advising on what sort of bargain he



Carole Myer with Chicago journalist Roger Ebert.

Sales Lady

Carole Myer's Trade Tips

CHRIS PEACHMENT

should be striking, while still engaged on their particular deal. Few would be as lucky.

'The interesting thing is that buying and selling for TV is a very public affair. All the prices are pretty standard, and they are all published. But the film world for some reason is very secretive. I would dearly like to know, for instance, what David Puttnam made on a film like *Cal*. But it would be impossible to find out, because first of all Warners probably wouldn't have any concrete figures, and neither would Puttnam; even if they were willing to publicise them, which patently they are not.'

True to form, Carole Myer won't exactly talk figures either. Indeed it would be unfair to expect her to do so. When playing poker one does not reveal one's hand to the other players. But it is certainly becoming harder by the day to recoup costs sufficiently on British films being sold abroad, simply because the cost of making small films, such as the ones Channel 4 is involved in, has risen so sharply. 'Chabrol's latest film was made on 35mm for something like

£650,000. You couldn't get anything on 16mm for that in this country. This is for all sorts of reasons like the financial climate and the unions. But the asking prices have not risen by any comparable amount. Consequently, when you say the film cost *x* and you are likely to get back *y* from foreign sales, *very rarely do the figures match*. Moreover, when I put my figures together to come up with an asking price, I am usually working on the assumption that the film is a masterpiece—that it will turn out to be the *Paris, Texas* of its year. I do have a sub-distributor, Bill Gavin, for Australia, who is a good judge. He peers at my figures and usually agrees that they are not completely off the wall.'

So what are the chief differences between selling films for the BFI and doing so for Channel 4? 'Considerable. I didn't realise how stodgy I had become at the BFI. I was virtually on automatic pilot. Although, in retrospect, there was nothing different that I could have done. The BFI films, by the very nature of their production and what they are meant to be, have very strictly defined limits

surrounding them. All you could ever seem to do was sell them for non-theatrical rights abroad—Dutch tv or something like that. It did all change, however, with *The Draughtsman's Contract*. *Radio On* and the Bill Douglas trilogy certainly had a lot of cachet. But *Draughtsman* was the first big commercial success. It went to Venice initially and only two people wanted to buy it. One was an American woman who offered a ridiculously low figure. After the film was such a success, she came back and said: "I got the figures right, it's just the number of zeroes I got wrong." But I give her every credit for spotting the film in the first place. Neither I, nor anyone else involved, ever thought it would catch on like that. This is absolutely true about *Draughtsman*, because towards the end of filming they staged a showing of the rough film for a number of film companies in order to raise more finance, and not one of them picked up on it.

'*The Draughtsman's Contract* is also a very good illustration of the arbitrary way in which film sales work. It won the Richard Roud seal of approval at the New York Film Festival, and a very good deal was struck because people smelt money. That deal got written up in *Variety*, and from then on people were all enthusiasm. When I took the film to MIFED, there was one buyer who hadn't heard about it, and he was the usual bored buyer. He actually said, "Can you send me a cassette to look at," which is

the equivalent of "Don't call us, we'll call you." Then the next day he came rushing back, offering all kinds of money, because he had just been chatting to the buyer for UA Classics division, who was crowing about his new purchase of the film. Every little word of mouth helps.'

Does the selling of films ever take on the aspects of an auction? 'Not really. The only way that you can keep putting your prices up is if you have two very strong bidders. And that is unlikely because in most countries there is only one man who deals with the particular area into which your film falls. Similar to, say, *Artificial Eye* in this country, who deal in up-market European art movies. Sellers usually deal mainly with one distributor in any one country, although it helps if others become interested because it then ups the ante. I tend not to stick always with one person, but I do have "special relationships" with some people, who at least want to see my movies even if they are not buying.'

Then would one very good product, which made real money at the box office, enable a seller to ask a higher price for his next movie? 'Again, not necessarily. One good product *will* give you credibility for the next one. In other words, it might guarantee a sale, but not necessarily a better price. The buyer in Scandinavia took *She'll Be Wearing Pink Pyjamas* for his video outlet, and did very well with it. But he wanted to expand on the theatrical side, so he came back to me thinking, quite rightly, that

Wetherby would be good for him on that side. I could also, at the same time, recommend *Letter to Brezhnev* to him, as the sort of product I knew he could use correctly. So it all builds up, rather than necessarily increasing in price.

'But there is one crucial difference between Channel 4 and the BFI. At the BFI no one was exactly fighting me for the rights to the films. At C4 I had to establish my credibility very strongly so that I could hang on to the rights. I actually talked to all the producers, to emphasise that it was a professional Film Sales, it would be called Film Four International, it would be the sales arm for Channel 4, but only for film sales, and if their projects went through some time in the future, then I would be in it for a stake.'

Finally, just what is it that makes British films so different, so appealing? 'The minute that anything leaves these humble shores, it becomes an art movie. Even *Chariots of Fire* started life as a "specialised movie" before it crossed over. It just has to fall off the end of our pier and into the water and it becomes a quality product. This is not endemically British; Dutch movies have their hardest time in Holland too. However, I would say, quite dispassionately, that most of the films in the British independent sector have at the very least got *moments* that are more interesting than any moment in *Ghostbusters*. Ken Loach's *Family Life* is in its eighteenth month in Stockholm.'



Antonioni

or, *The Surface of the World*

SEYMOUR CHATMAN

Michelangelo Antonioni is undeniably one of the great *visual* artists of the cinema. The central and distinguishing strength of Antonioni's mature films, Seymour Chatman argues, is narration by a kind of visual minimalism, by an intense concentration on the sheer appearance of things and a minimization of explanatory dialogue. Although traditional audiences have balked at the "opacity" of Antonioni's films, their rendered surface is eloquent once one has learned to read it. This study covers films not dealt with in any other book on the director, including *The Mystery of Oberwald*, and *Identification of a Woman*. Its coverage of the early documentaries and features is especially full. In a free-ranging analysis of the evolution of Antonioni's style, Chatman quotes liberally from Antonioni's own highly articulate writings and interviews.

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The Dark Side of the Landscape

There has not been a Bill Douglas film since the completion of his justly acclaimed trilogy in 1978, but after four years preparation and many false starts, Douglas is now shooting the most eagerly awaited British film of the decade: *Comrades*, or the story of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. The vicissitudes of Douglas' career mirror those of independent production in Britain: *My Childhood* was the first film to emerge from the reconstituted BFI Production Board under Mamoun Hassan, and *Comrades* is the last to be supported by the National Film Finance Corporation and the last to be produced by Simon Relph before he takes over as chief executive of the British Screen Finance Consortium (the NFFC's successor) at the start of 1986. Douglas is therefore a barometer of an industry which must be judged by the extent to which it can manage to accommodate film-makers who, as Simon Relph put it, 'don't just look for the best angle to shoot two actors talking to each other.'

Labour history honours the Tolpuddle Martyrs as primitive rebels—they were farm workers who formed a union to combat the systematic reduction of their wages and who were sentenced to transportation in 1834. For the 1984 anniversary the story was given a modern gloss in John McGrath's stage adaptation. But this was not what inspired Bill Douglas. Despite the distance between Edinburgh and Dorset, one can surmise that a degree of similarity between a Scots mining village in 1945 and Tolpuddle in the early nineteenth century might have attracted the filmmaker. One thing shared by the Jamie of the trilogy and the Dorset farm workers is poverty. In the trilogy this produced a stark poetry through an extreme economy of means which made the child's predicament heart-rending. Flagrant injustice is likewise the key to the Tolpuddlers' misfortunes, for they were simple men whose childlike trust in their employers was abused.

Another factor, perhaps, is that Dorset has changed remarkably little over the last century and a half. Its system of land tenure is curious: much of it is still in the hands of those who owned it in

1834, and many of their employees still live in the tied cottages that have been described as 'feudal'. But a great deal also belongs to the Ministry of Defence. If it was the Agricultural Revolution

Jill Forbes

and, particularly, the Enclosures which dispossessed and impoverished the farm workers in 1834, in this century it is the Army which has taken over the countryside. The improvised road signs to the *Comrades* locations nestle incongruously beside elaborate indicator boards telling the local populace whether this

road or that beauty spot is open or closed. All rather like Much Binding in the Marsh—except that it's for real.

Thanks to the war, the area is littered with Deserted Villages, one of which is Tyneham whose population has never been allowed back from evacuation. As the expropriated Lady of the Manor has it, in her memoir on sale in the county museum, Tyneham is a lost heritage. However, the real Tolpuddle, though graced with Martyrs' Memorial and Museum, is sliced by a main road heavy with holiday traffic, whereas the streets of Tyneham are devoid of modern furniture: no TV aerials, telegraph wires, electricity pylons, pedestrian crossings, road markings or any of the other icons of internal combustion and electronic communication.

Simon Relph (left) and Bill Douglas in Tyneham.



So this is where the *Comrades* facades have gone up—the only problem being that shooting the film in this temporary Tolpuddle has to be fitted in between shooting the enemy. Tanks lurking behind bushes, gates that must not open—the casual visitor is made to feel as embattled as the western motorist driving through East Germany to Berlin. But Dorset specialises in such spooky effects, as Hardy readers know, and I confess to being not altogether surprised to find Simon Relph and the *Comrades* team installed in Bindon Abbey where, it will be recalled, Tess was buried.

In these slightly eerie surroundings, Simon Relph talked not just about *Comrades*—which on the day of my visit had come to a temporary halt because Bill Douglas was not well—but also his hopes for the British film industry as he embarks on his new job as chief executive of the British Screen Finance Consortium.

JILL FORBES: How did you become involved in *Comrades*?

SIMON RELPH: I first read the script in September or October 1984, when I was approached by Ismail Merchant about working with him. He was committed to *A Room with a View* and the start of *Comrades* was beginning to slip. Then Jeremy Isaacs rang me in December and asked if I would take it over, because Channel 4 have money in it as well as the NFCC. Bill began writing for the NFCC in 1980, but he tells me they couldn't actually find a producer—which I can't quite believe. But I thought the script was just amazing. I hardly knew Bill's work—I'd only seen *My Childhood*, which I'd liked very much, but then I viewed all his films which made me even more enthusiastic about the script. I met Bill for the first time after Christmas 1984 and we've been working at it ever since. I've also been able to find a little more money and get a little more time, which helped get over some of the original problems.

Have you changed the cast?

Four of the Martyrs are the same and two not, and all the wives are the same. The idea is that those actors who play Martyrs are not well known—or not familiar to film audiences—but that the people who play the Establishment are, though they're on the screen for less time. So Michael Hordern is playing Pitt, the lawyer who befriended the Martyrs and rescued them from Australia. Robert Stephens is James Frampton, the magistrate who was responsible for their arrest and trial, and Freddie Jones is Dr Warren, the vicar who was closely involved in the dispute over wages. I hope Vanessa Redgrave will play Mrs Carlisle, a woman in Australia who employed one of them. Michael Clark, the dancer, is playing a sailor who passes through the village when we have a harvest festival. Barbara Windsor is a lady who runs a print shop in Dorchester where George Loveless goes to get his banner done for the union...

Do you go to Australia?

Yes. The film begins just before the dispute over wages which resulted in their being sent to Australia. It follows only the story of the men, but none of the political goings-on around them, and it ends when they are repatriated and presented to the London-Dorchester Committee, which was the group who got them pardoned, on the stage of the Old Vic.

No one died out there?

One got stuck because they couldn't find him, though they did eventually and he's the only one buried in Tolpuddle. The rest went to Canada, which is interesting. The important thing is that Bill is not trying to do an accurate, documentary-style reconstruction of the events. I don't think the film is wildly inaccurate, but some things have had to be invented, for instance since not much of George Loveless' private life is known. This is a *movie*, inspired by the example of these men. If you like, it's the difference between a painting of something and a photograph of something. It isn't going to depend on historical accuracy for its success.

A very emotive story, nevertheless?

I think Bill was very touched by the spirit of these simple men, and he always maintains vehemently that it's not a political film. This is true in the sense that *Comrades* is not trying to be polemical. But in another sense, it *has* to be a political film because it is dealing with that continuing divide between one class and another. And interestingly, it would seem that in this part of the world not much has changed. The working community is, I'm sure, paid a little better and they work more humane hours, but there isn't a great advance. However, the script that Bill placed in front of me was extraordinarily detailed and evocative, and I felt I should focus on bringing that about, rather than trying to bring in influences. By the time I came in it was at an advanced stage of development, and the sort of work we've been doing concerns research into what life was like, what agriculture was like, how things were grown, what fields were like, what fences were like...

It seems to me that if you make a film called *Comrades* in the current political climate, it's bound to be read as a political statement...

Yes. But Bill wasn't intending to intellectualise the debate. I think what we're doing enforces an emotional reaction, or perhaps one should say a political-emotional reaction. But I think it will be extremely pertinent, and something of the irony of the title is that Bill called it 'Comrades' because it is a story about friends, and that word has now become a dirty word which most of the world and most of the press understand as meaning some sort of subversive, anti-patriot person who is plotting to overthrow the order of the realm. But there's a sort of nobility in these men and it is the reason why, at the time, the middle classes rose up, defended them and brought them

back. They were clearly innocent and we are saying 'these are comrades'.

All my films, one way or another, have a political interest. *The Return of the Soldier* is about somebody who was considered not good enough to marry the upper-class man, about war, and about the way people were used. *Privates on Parade* is a highly political film about innocents being sent to the slaughter. *The Ploughman's Lunch* is a directly political film. The only one that perhaps isn't—or not so much—is *Laughterhouse*, but even that has an element of a 'man against the system'. However, the reason I am excited about *Comrades* is not politics but because of Bill Douglas and his vision of the subject and what seems to me an incredible opportunity to make a real film—a film which, I think, will have enormous popular appeal and won't in any way be inaccessible, which for the money...

What's the budget?

Just over two million pounds—not a lot to make an epic film over twelve weeks in two continents with a big cast and in colour!

This brings me to the other topic I'd like to talk about, especially in view of your impending arrival at the British Screen Finance Consortium, and that is the whole question of film production in Britain. For example, is there such a thing as the 'authentically British subject'? Do international audiences who see films in the English language somehow expect them to be blandly mid-Atlantic?

When we were trying to make films at Greenpoint which were directed towards what we saw as the European market—in other words we wanted our films to stand alongside European movies—that sort of worked, but the language is a problem. It seems strange that if the films were in Italian or French they would have been fine! It is very hard for British films to get established in Europe, and actually less hard to find an audience for indigenous British films in America.

But what's interesting is the point at which a film moves over from being a *Wetherby* or a *Dance with a Stranger* to being a *Gandhi* or a *Chariots of Fire*. At what point does the international audience suddenly come over? I think a lot has to do with the way the film is marketed—I'm sure that's true of *Chariots of Fire* and it may be happening with *Dance with a Stranger*.

So the image of the British film industry, rather than the nature of the subjects, is something you have to be concerned with?

Very much so. I believe that what's wrong with the industry has nothing to do with the product. We've been doing quite interesting and varied work, which is true to ourselves and at the same time consistently appealing, but we're not getting a fair return financially. Although the films actually turn over considerable sums of money, they don't return significantly to the producers. A



Com

Martyrs: from left, William Gaminara, Patrick Field, Robin Soans, Philip Davis, Jeremy Flynn, Stephen Bateman.

Robert Stephens as the magistrate James Frampton.





grades



Left, Amber Wilkinson. Above, Heather Page and Freddie Jones.

Stephen Bateman and Imelda Staunton. Photographs: David Appleby.



The Dark Side of the Landscape

number of companies who have gone into smaller films are already withdrawing because they feel they have to spend as much money as they would on a larger film to get a reasonable return, and the risk is too great for the amount of money involved.

You're saying that the marketing costs of British films are too high?

The whole business of promoting the films reduces the amount coming back to the producers to something so small that people now say the concept of making ten small films for the price of one large one, because any one of those might be a *Gregory's Girl* and it's a better way of spreading the risk, isn't working out. I'm interested in trying to see to it that the really large markets like cable and TV provide a real return on films to the producers. We've been seduced into thinking that theatrical release is the absolute, all important aim, particularly in America, and that in order to get that you have to give up to the American distributors your interest in video, cable and all those things which might well help to pay for the film. My new job isn't just about deciding which films to invest in, and one of the things that most interests me is trying to find a way of working between those companies which produce British films and improving the return from overseas markets. Because if we don't do that we'll simply go back to where we were ten years ago, and nobody apart from Channel 4 and the BSFC will invest in this kind of British production. People have to get their money back more times than not, and at the moment they're not. It has to be a proper business—and that's very much my concern at the BSFC.

I'm not one who believes that one should be subsidised to make films that nobody particularly wants to see because in the view of a small number of people they are masterpieces. There is a level of production, which I think the BFI represents particularly, which provides for that kind of film-making very well, and very properly too.

Do you think part of the problem, in terms of having a bargaining position in world markets, is that there isn't the volume or the range of British films?

One idea is that we ought to try to put things together more—use the strength of films like *Chariots of Fire*, *Gregory's Girl* or *Dance with a Stranger* to market packages. Whether the individual financing companies will be prepared to do that I have no idea. Usually what happens is that the film is sold to an

American distributor who takes all the rights. But it's something we have to address urgently, otherwise medium-low budget production is going to dry up and British directors are going to move towards America.

Nevertheless, the American market remains the crucial one?

No question, as far as getting a return on one's investment is concerned. It's the largest English language market and you can get your money straight back in one fell swoop. But creatively, we have been trying to look towards the European market. At Greenpoint and Skreba, the two production companies I have recently been involved with, we wanted to take our place in European cinema—that was my personal view and the view of my colleagues. We were anxious to be recognised as a major contributor to European cinema, but the financial returns are much less from those markets.

It should also be added that we're working against a background in which the two principal companies that own our cinemas have been trying to turn them into something else—for the last twenty years! And they don't want to prove anything. Certain other independent people have shown that cinemas can work fruitfully and successfully. So I want to involve myself in exhibition. We are living in an era in which most of the principal exhibitors and distributors think all they have to do is put an ad in the paper on Friday afternoon and everyone will fill the cinema next week. It's ludicrous—people don't work that way any more. We broke the record in Bradford with *Wetherby*—we were more than *Paris, Texas*, which held it previously—and we did that simply by informing people and treating them intelligently. And what's so difficult? Because the one thing that people really want to see is movies!

Do you see a role for the State in the film industry?

I'm not in favour of great handouts so that people can indulge themselves. But what the State can and should do is stimulate the business. By the investment of public money in the cinema you bring about a number of very desirable things, not least the enhancement of money coming into the country and the encouragement towards other people coming here to make their films. I took the job at the BSFC because I thought that even with that very small amount of money there was a real chance, if one used it well.

So how does it work?

The Government gives us £1.5 million a year, and the partners, or 'directors'—Channel 4, Rank, Thorn EMI and the British Videogram Association—each put in an amount which, together with the money earned from the NFFC's investments and other monies, comes to about another £1.5 million. So we have a sum which I think is at least equivalent to what was coming in from Eady. That money is then used to attract other finance, and the reason why it's quite attractive is that the Government money is, in a sense, between the other investors and loss, because they will get their money back first. We are pledged to invest in projects that should be commercial, but they may well be more risky than others which would find support elsewhere. There's going to be a bit of bravery about the BSFC which is protected by the Government's contribution.

What's the difference between this and the NFFC?

Not a lot. But the crucial difference is that at the NFFC the decision to invest was made by a Board, whereas my board is not going to take part in the selection process. I intend to consult, but not in the same way because I don't think committees tend to make the best kind of decisions. I intend to consult by sending scripts to people I think will like them, to a mixture of people, my peers in the industry. Within the BSFC there will be a small group of people, 'officers' if you like, which I hope will include figures from the past, who will be looking at scripts.

Are you precluded from being a producer?

Yes. I can't make films for three years.

What do you do about people who want to make a first film or, indeed, a second film but who don't really have a track record? Will you back them?

Yes, we will. The intention of the BSFC is to encourage young producers and young directors. The Consortium shouldn't just become a vehicle for the making of films which happen to fit my own particular tastes. The idea is that somebody from outside can come to us and talk about an idea or a script. The borderline is whether I actually go out and start being the producer and approach directors, which I think perhaps is slightly going against what the intention is. I think we should be available to producers and directors who have their own ideas.

Are you satisfied with the amount of money you will have?

We'd all like a fund of £20 million, not £3 million. And the first thing I would say about more money is that one could invest in films of greater scale. We are limited to films of quite small budgets, which is a great pity because, as many of our best film-makers will tell you, film-making is about working on a broad canvas. Twenty million is probably not that many medium budget films. But... it can only get better and I'm going to try to do something to bring that about. ■



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Gertrud

The Desire for the Image

Jonathan Rosenbaum
writes about
Carl Dreyer's controversial
late masterpiece



Josephine Nilsson,
Carl Dreyer's mother.
From the biography
by Maurice Drouzy.

There are narrative and non-narrative ways of summing up a life or conjuring a work of art, but when it comes to analysing life or art in dramatic terms, it is usually the narrative method that wins hands down. Our news, fiction and daily conversations all tend to take a story form, and our reflexes define that form as consecutive and causal—a chain of events moving in the direction of an inquiry, the solution of a riddle. Faced with a succession of film frames, our desire to impose a narrative is usually so strong that only the most ruthless and delicate of strategies can allow us to perceive anything else.

Carl Dreyer allows us to perceive something else, but never without a battle. The non-narrative spectre which haunts the narrative of *Gertrud* (1964), contained in the figure of Gertrud herself, is threatened at every turn by dogs snapping at her heels—a narrative world of men with pasts and futures who stake a claim on her. But Gertrud, who lives only in a continuous present, persistent and changeless, eludes them all. And if she eludes us as well, this may be because our narrative equipment can read her only as a monotone—an arrested moment (as in painting) or a suspended moment (as in music) that

can lead to no higher logic. Yet from the vantage point of her refusal to inquire, she has a lot to say to the men.

To arrive at the non-narrative side of *Gertrud*—the static essentials that no amount of narrative tide can wash away—it is useful to consider the life and art of Dreyer as well. We can begin, in fact, with the stories of two men and four women—Dreyer, Hjalmar Söderberg, Josephine Nilsson, Marie Dreyer, Maria von Platen, and Gertrud—only one of whom is fictional. Starting with these family plots, we can, I hope, reach those aspects of the film which eschew plot altogether.

Gertrud as Family Plot

1889: Josephine Bernhardine Nilsson, 33, pregnant, unmarried and Swedish, who manages the household of a large farm in Carlsro, arrives in Copenhagen in mid-January. A couple of weeks later, she gives birth to a son. After the boy is passed from one foster home to another for the better part of a year, and spends a few weeks in an orphanage, she returns to Copenhagen and places an ad in a newspaper, claiming that the boy's father has left for America and looking to get him adopted.

Eventually the boy is taken in by a tram conductor and his wife. But when the Petersen family decides not to keep him, Josephine makes a third trip to Copenhagen in late August 1890, places another ad, and finally gets the boy adopted by a typesetter and his wife named Carl and Marie Dreyer, signing the necessary papers two months later. By this time, however, she has found herself pregnant again, perhaps by another man. In her seventh month, mid-January 1891, she desperately attempts to abort the child by taking a box and a half of matches, cutting off the heads and swallowing them, and suffers a hideous death from sulphur poisoning. A macabre autopsy is conducted in Stockholm by a team of doctors, and when it is finally concluded that her death was not suicide, she is buried in a churchyard.

The adopted son of Carl and Marie, named after his adopted father, has a non-religious upbringing. His older sister, Valborg, was also born out of wedlock, when Marie was a teenager and before she met Carl, and throughout the younger Carl's childhood, Marie expresses her contempt for Josephine having abandoned her child. The boy grows up lonely, taciturn and resentful; as he was to express it in a brief and rare autobiographical sketch written in the 40s, he was adopted by a family who reminded him on every occasion that he should be aware of the nourishment he was receiving, and that, strictly speaking, he had no right to anything because his mother had deprived them of her support for him by arranging to die. (When Marie Dreyer herself dies aged 73, in 1937, he refuses to attend her funeral, saying she has already long been dead for him; he doesn't even want to hear her name spoken.)

On the other hand, he reveres and idealises the image of his real mother, regarding her as a victim rather than a villainess. In 1908, shortly after his nineteenth birthday, he quits his post at the Great Northern Telegraph Company, leaves Denmark for the first time, and travels to Sweden to learn whatever he can about her. When he returns to Copenhagen three months later, he embarks on a career as a journalist.

1901: Maria von Platen, 31, Swedish opera singer—who at 19 had married a state official 26 years her senior, and who subsequently left him to join a

bohemian milieu of artists in Stockholm—writes to the author Hjalmar Söderberg, expressing admiration for his work. A stormy affair develops between them and lasts for many years. Söderberg is tied by an unhappy marriage to an ailing wife; but when he finally succeeds in dissolving the marriage in the spring of 1906, he discovers that Maria has just been seduced by a young writer, Gustav Hellström, and has fallen in love with him. At a party, Söderberg hears Hellström bragging about his recent sexual exploits, Maria von Platen among them. Enraged and grief-stricken, Söderberg leaves Stockholm for Copenhagen and in the space of a month writes a play, largely based on this experience, entitled *Gertrud*.

1962: In the newspaper *Politiken*, Carl Dreyer, 73—who has not made a feature in a decade, and who has been trying to finance one about Jesus for at least fifteen years—reads an article about a doctoral thesis published in Sweden which demonstrates that Söderberg's *Gertrud* was largely autobiographical. Back in the 20s, Dreyer had thought of adapting *Gertrud* as well as Söderberg's novel *Dr Glas*. Now his interest is sparked in particular by the information that Maria von Platen had grown up and spent both the first years of her marriage and the last years of her life in the same area where Josephine Nilsson lived. All at once, Dreyer hits on the notion of adding an epilogue to *Gertrud* based on von Platen's last years, to be filmed on location at the very house where she lived—only ten miles from Carlsro, the site of his own conception.

After Dreyer finds a producer for the film, he contacts the present owners of Maria von Platen's house, pays them a visit, and writes to her family for permission to shoot there. But too many complications intervene and, as with his desire to shoot *Gertrud* in colour, he has

to set this dream aside, finally agreeing to reconstruct some of the interiors in a studio.

The three narratives above are selectively paraphrased, after a fashion, from portions of Maurice Drouzy's *Carl Th. Dreyer né Nilsson* (Editions du Cerf, 1982), the first Dreyer biography in any language. Collectively, they weave an intriguing mesh of motivations in relation to the cantankerous beauty and contradictory impact of Dreyer's late masterpiece and most controversial work—most of which is set in 1906, the year he left home. Seizing upon Dreyer's traumatic relationships to both his real and adopted mothers as the key that unlocks the mysteries of his films, Drouzy writes a troubled biography that in many respects seems comparable to Donald Spoto's recent life of Hitchcock. And if his thesis is too monolithic to qualify as a convincing critical argument, it brings a flurry of fresh insights into many corners of Dreyer's life and work. At the least, it definitively lays to rest some of the misinformation found in most standard works (for example, Katz' *Film Encyclopedia*: 'He was brought up by a strict Lutheran family . . .').

An intensely private film-maker whose scripts were nearly all adaptations, Dreyer has never been regarded as an autobiographical artist, but the obsessional nature of his work has posed mysteries that critics have been trying to unravel for over half a century. (The assumption that Dreyer was a religious artist—suggested by his frequent recourse to religious subjects, but contradicted by virtually all the other information we have about him—is probably the most common method of filling in the blanks.) Without conclusively solving any of these mysteries, Drouzy allows us to speculate further about a good many matters: the

Filming the last sequence: Nina Pens Røde (Gertrud), Carl Dreyer, Axel Strøbye (Axel).



persistent images of tortured and/or suffering women (in *Leaves from Satan's Book*, *Master of the House*, *Passion of Joan of Arc*, *Vampyr*, *Day of Wrath*, *Ordet*); the subject of Dreyer's first documentary (unwed mothers); the mistrust and lack of identification with all institutions, coupled with the theme of intolerance; his interest in adapting *Light in August* (which juxtaposes an ideal earth mother with a doomed, illegitimate orphan who can never know his true identity); his passionate feminism; and a great deal more.

For Drouzy, much of Dreyer's *oeuvre* reflects his attitudes towards his 'true' and 'false' mothers, and even some of the character names in his films are telling. Only Gertrud encompasses both the true and false mothers by figuring at once as monster and martyr—an intransigent purist like Dreyer himself.

Significantly, Dreyer acknowledged both aspects of Gertrud's character in various interviews, seeing her as stronger than all the male characters yet intolerant as well ('She can't accept anything that she doesn't feel herself'), adding that none of the men could possibly live up to her ideal. One could argue, in fact, that the entire tragic force of the film can be felt behind Dreyer's passionate ambivalence. Critics on the whole have been divided between regarding her as monstrous or sublime, fulfilled or self-deluded, victim or victor, but the film's curious achievement is to make her all these things at once, at every moment.

The perfection of Nina Pens Rode's performance, seldom remarked on, is very much a matter of its capacity to absorb these contradictions. Consider her cracked, fragile voice (which enters another realm entirely when she sings, a difference enhanced by the postdubbing of the music), her confident ironic smile, her girlish gestures around Erland (such as her pendulum-like swings towards and away from him when they sit together at their last meeting), her measured, parsimonious movements around a room. These disparate traits and others have a kaleidoscope effect quite distinct from Falconetti's more concentrated Jeanne d'Arc—an equally non-narrative, non-developing character also conceived as a form of unwavering intensity.

Gertrud as Adaptation

Disregarding the play for the moment, the film unfolds roughly as follows:

1. On the eve of his appointment as a cabinet minister, and immediately after a visit from his elderly mother, Gustav Kanning, a liberal, middle-aged lawyer living in Copenhagen, is told by his wife Gertrud that she no longer wants to continue their marriage. Under his questioning, she admits that she loves another man (whose identity she refuses to reveal) but has not yet slept with him. Before she leaves, ostensibly for the opera to see *Fidelio*, Gustav and Gertrud plan to attend a banquet honouring the fifty-year-old poet Gabriel Lidman, a

former lover of Gertrud before she met Gustav, who is returning from abroad for the ceremony.

2. In a park, Gertrud meets the young composer and pianist Erland Jansson, a pampered *enfant terrible* who is the object of her love. After she tells him of her decision to leave her husband, and recalls in a flashback her previous visit to Erland's flat, when she sang one of his compositions, they leave together for his flat to make love. At her request, Erland plays one of his pieces while she undresses in the next room.

3. Alone in a carriage, on his way back from a board meeting, Gustav experiences a sudden desire to see Gertrud again (expressed in offscreen narration in past tense) and decides to meet her at the opera. He learns from an attendant that she has not been there all evening.

4. At the banquet for Gabriel Lidman, Gertrud develops a headache during her husband's speech and goes into the adjacent sitting-room, where she is joined by her old friend Axel Nygren, visiting from Paris, who discusses with her free will and his psychiatric research there. Looking up at a tapestry on the wall, Gertrud is shocked to find a dream that she had previously described to Erland—being chased naked by a pack of dogs—virtually reproduced. When Axel leaves, she is joined by Gustav, agitated by her absence from the opera, her recent refusals to sleep with him and her decision to leave him. Then, when he is called away by the Vice-Chancellor, she is joined by Gabriel, still

in love with her, who reveals having attended a courtesan's party the night before—a party which Gertrud had begged Erland not to attend—where he heard Erland drunkenly boasting of his conquest of Gertrud. After Gabriel bursts into tears and leaves, Gustav returns with the Vice-Chancellor and asks Gertrud to sing for him, enlisting Erland as accompanist. While singing, Gertrud faints.

5. In the park, Gertrud meets Erland and urges him to run away with her, offering to support him. He refuses, confessing that he is committed to another older woman who helped him when he was penniless and is now pregnant by him. He suggests that Gertrud remain with Gustav and continue their affair, and invites her to return with him to his flat, but she refuses.

6. Back in the Kanning flat, Gabriel comes to call. While Gustav is out of the room, Gabriel begs Gertrud to live with him again, but she refuses, and recalls in a flashback how she left him in Rome years before after finding a note on his desk which said, 'A woman's love and a man's work are in conflict from the beginning.' After Gustav returns, Gertrud goes to phone Axel, saying that she's coming to Paris to attend lectures at the Sorbonne and wants to join his psychiatric research group. Before Gabriel leaves, Gustav announces that he has just accepted the post of cabinet minister. Then he pleads with Gertrud once again to remain with him, even if she continues her affair; but Gertrud

'Alone in a carriage...' Bendt Rothe as Gustav Kanning.



insists that she's leaving alone, and does so.

7. Thirty or forty years later, Axel comes to visit Gertrud at her house in the country, where she lives alone. She tells Axel she has no regrets for the life she has led, and returns all his letters of friendship to her, which he burns in the hearth. She reads him a poem she wrote when she was sixteen, which she describes as her 'gospel of love', and mentions that she has already selected her grave site and the inscription, 'Amor Omnia' (Love Is Everything). Axel leaves her after they have said goodbye for the last time.

Because Söderberg's play has never been available in English, non-Scandinavian Dreyer criticism generally has next to nothing to say about it. Fortunately, a French translation exists—published in *La Grande Revue* in 1908—and it reveals that the film is anything but a close adaptation, even though most of the dialogue can be traced back to Söderberg. An elaborate series of cuts, additions, alterations and transpositions preserves the main plot while markedly changing both the characters and parts of the story's meaning.

To cite only a few of the most conspicuous differences: in the original, Gertrud has had a child by Gustav who has died in infancy; Gabriel (a playwright, not a poet) has a Spanish wife; there are many references to the politics of the day, and the setting is Stockholm, not Copenhagen; Gustav's mother visits him not only in the first act but at the

end of the third, after Gertrud's departure, and a subplot charts both her cultivation of young male singers and her failure to visit a poet, a former lover, on his deathbed.

Gertrud recounts the same dream with the dogs, but there is no tapestry to reproduce it. At the banquet, many additional characters figure, including a mysterious female 'shadow' who appears before Gertrud in Strindbergian fashion to recite a short poem which, in the film, becomes her own 'gospel of love' at sixteen. The 'Amor Omnia' inscription is one that Gabriel recalls seeing with Gertrud one spring night on the grave of a stranger. Both flashbacks, Gustav's carriage ride and the love scene in Erland's flat are alluded to but not shown; when Gertrud breaks with Gabriel in Rome, he is suffering from writer's block—which motivates the note on his desk—and it is long after they have ceased living together.

All the characters in the play are somewhat coarser, their motivations less pure—especially Gabriel, who is more of a wastrel, and Gertrud, whose cruel streak and chatter make her distinctly less heroic. ('Do you want the brutal truth?' she asks Gabriel in the third act. 'I could love you once more if you could make yourself thirty again.') Most important of all, Axel and everything he represents—friendship, psychoanalysis, a belief in free will—are nowhere to be seen; and when Gertrud leaves Gustav in the third act, it is not clear where she is going.

According to Drever, most of the

epilogue is derived from a letter from Maria von Platen to John Landqvist. Without this letter as evidence, it is all too tempting to read both the epilogue and Axel and Gertrud's early involvement with psychoanalysis as a personal catalyst on Dreyer's part which transforms the meaning of everything else. Yet if we assume that his use of von Platen's life is as creatively selective as his reworking of Söderberg, it is hardly excessive to claim that he was interested in achieving something more than mere documentation. In broad terms, his major contribution to the play is a purification of Gertrud's character which places her well beyond the bitter misogyny of the original, privileges and extends both her constancy and her martyrdom over several decades, and infuses her with an ambiguity regarding the origin, endpoint, object and nature of her obsession with love.

Gertrud as Passage and Process

If Dreyer's film... doesn't function formally as a dream, it nevertheless... prescribes an 'oneiric' vocabulary: at once the *telling* of a dream and a session of *analysis*, an analysis in which the roles are ceaselessly changing; subjected to the flow, the regular tide of the long takes, the mesmeric passes of the incessant camera movements, the even monotone of the voices, the steadiness of the eyes—always turned aside, often parallel, towards us: a little above us—the strained immobility of the bodies, huddled in armchairs, on sofas behind which the other silently stands, fixed in ritual attitudes which make them no more than corridors for speech to pass through, gliding through a semi-obscurity arbitrarily punctuated with luminous zones into which the somnambulists emerge of their own accord...

Jacques Rivette, 1969

The darkness has formed a pearl,
The night has born a dream.
Hidden, it will grow inside me,
Blindly white and tender.

2nd verse of Erland Jansson's
'Serenade', sung by Gertrud

A ghost sonata, *Gertrud* summons up other obsessive and haunted memory-films—*The Magnificent Ambersons*, *Lola Montès*, *Last Year at Marienbad*, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, *India Song*—as well as phantoms of the films Dreyer wanted to make but couldn't during the last years of his life: *Marie Stuart*, *Medea*, *Light in August*, *As I Lay Dying*, *Jesus*; all steps towards what he conceptualised as film tragedy.

Theorists are fond of noting that film and psychoanalysis started at about the same time, and the hypnotic nature of the medium runs parallel to the notion of projections on a dream screen. Dreyer's return to his origins, like Gertrud's eventual return to the town of her birth, thus suggests the origins of cinema as well as desire, and critics who

At the banquet: Gertrud, Axel Nygren and the tapestry from Gertrud's dream.



have regarded *Gertrud* as 'out of date' are not entirely wrong; it is certainly out of its time. Intimately bound up with questions about identity and the self, it transforms a once contemporary play into a perpetually unfashionable, seemingly atemporal memory-film that is as much concerned with echoes and overtones, auras and afterimages as with the remote and often inaccessible events which produce them.

The trancelike rhythm caught by Rivette, evocative of the psychoanalytic session, combines two simultaneous cognitive modes—the *telling* of a dream and a session of *analysis*—which invite identification and detachment alike. While presenting Gertrud to us in very much the way that she views (and remembers) herself, the film also allows us to see beyond her self-image, however narrow the world may be which circumscribes it.

This distance is more apparent in the prints of *Gertrud* that mainly circulate today, missing the four rhymed intertitles which separated the three acts and epilogue in the original 1964 release version, all addressed by Gertrud to herself (and written for Dreyer by Grethe Rishjerg Thomsen, who also contributed the song lyrics). Whether Dreyer himself removed these titles is unclear, but he did voice some misgivings about them to Børge Trolle in *Kosmorama* ('They didn't quite fulfil the purpose I had for them'), while adding the intriguing suggestion that had the film been in colour, they wouldn't have been necessary. Because these verses are difficult to come by today, it seems worth reproducing them in full (translated literally from the French version of the script, where they also appear without rhyme or meter):

- 1 You dreamt of a beloved hand
Which could break your chains.
A sudden murmur shatters
The silence of your joyless house.
You leave now, your heart
Overflowing with tenderness
Towards your beautiful dream of happiness.
- 2 A new lucidity in your heart
Has filled your life with warmth,
But your happiness is without peace.
Troubled, you keep watch over your love
Among all those people who ignore it.
- 3 Your dream is finished.
Only the truth remains,
Hard as stone,
To that you were always faithful.
Deep is your suffering, pure is your heart
While the night encircles you.
- 4 Spring and winter pass
Back in the town of your birth.
Here you are, alone and old
And far from your memories.
This one must know:
To be able to grow old gracefully
Only two things exist:
Love and death, nothing more.

Dreyer's films tend to pose themselves as *challenges* to belief rather than as beliefs that demand simple adoption, and this is a stumbling block for many spectators. The sainthood of Jeanne d'Arc, the supernatural postulates of *Vampyr*, the acceptance of witchcraft at the end of *Day of Wrath* and the miracle at the end of *Ordet* are all imposed on the plots as



Gertrud with the mirror given to her by Gabriel.

formal necessities; yet our inability to accept any of these facts wholeheartedly is central to the impact of these films. A comparable problem relates to the idealism and self-image of Gertrud, and considering the laughter that initially greeted the above verses, it seems possible that Dreyer decided they overwhelmed the more objective side of the film.

Whatever the reason for their absence today, there are many other instances of Gertrud's love as self-love—including the verse from Jansson's 'Serenade' quoted above. Significantly, the water in the pond behind her and Erland forms a placid mirror to a stately line of trees at their first park meeting, a reflection broken by a drifting, riddled turbulence at the second. Like the mirror given to Gertrud by Gabriel (visible in the Kanning parlour) and the one given to her by Gustav (which remains offscreen), these surfaces all suggest portals of narcissism, judged and placed according to the self-image they throw back; and the ones tied to her love for Erland are solipsistic as well—nature reduced (or expanded) to the dimensions of her self-infatuation. 'Strange woman,' says Erland in his flat, shortly before they kiss. 'Who are you?' 'I'm many things. Dew which falls from the leaves. White clouds that pass aimlessly. I'm the moon, I'm the sky.' Like the verses, these mirrors function as inner voices more than ornaments—images of the self as a self-enclosed universe.

By contrast, the fires that flicker through *Gertrud* usually suggest potential fusions reaching beyond the self: the candles in Gustav's flat and the ones flanking Gabriel's mirror in the Kanning parlour; the torches and candles at the banquet; the burning hearth that

shimmers behind Gabriel and Gertrud in the third act and glows between Axel and Gertrud in the epilogue (while consuming his letters to her); not to mention the incandescent sunlight that floods both flashbacks and the epilogue. Yet by the end of the film, they have become mirrors too: 'I feel as though I'm staring into a fire about to be extinguished,' Gertrud says to Axel just before he leaves. The play's epigram, transposed by Dreyer to a statement of Gabriel's recalled by Gertrud, is 'I believe in the pleasures of the flesh and the irremediable loneliness of the soul.' This dialectic between incandescent joining and dark isolation—like the long bouts of inactivity separating the last four features in Dreyer's career—is harmonised like a treble and bass clef to compose the melody of Gertrud's longing, metrically spaced in a no less dialectical fashion between development and stasis.

Gertrud as Non-narrative

Sometimes a conflict emerges between the desire for the image and the desire for the story which is, after all, in psychoanalytic terms, normal, since the first one expresses, beyond the codes of modernism, a specular fascination for the body (of the Mother), and the second, the return of the repressed narrative, and consequently the necessity to pay one's debt to the Father.

Bérénice Reynaud*

Look at me. Am I beautiful?

No. But I have loved.

Look at me. Am I young?

No. But I have loved.

Look at me. Do I live?

No. But I have loved.

Gertrud's 'gospel of love',
written at the age of 16

When Godard defended *Gertrud* in the 60s as 'equal, in madness and beauty, to the last works of Beethoven,' one wonders whether he might have been partly thinking of the question and answer written by Beethoven as an epigraph to the finale of the last quartet (the corresponding musical passage figures centrally in 2 ou 3 *Choses que je sais d'elle*: 'Muss es sein? Es muss sein!' (Must it be? It must be!)). Poised evenly and unbearably between apologia and critique, *Gertrud* can be said to perform the radical step of superimposing that query and response rather than placing them in sequence.

When we first see Axel, we learn from Gertrud that he has written a book on free will; in the epilogue, he presents her with a copy of a new book, on Racine. Gertrud, an atheist, believes in free will, unlike her father, 'a sad fatalist' ('He thought that everything was predestined'), and believes, like Axel, that 'to wish is to choose'. Yet only a moment later, after Axel mentions studying 'psychosis, neurosis, dreams and symbols' in Paris, she discovers the wall

*'New York Independent Cinema,' *Fuse*, Summer 1985.

tapestry behind her, a depiction of her recurring dream. Soon afterwards, in separate scenes, Gabriel tells her that he 'had to' inform her of Erland's indiscretion, and Erland tells her that he 'had to' attend the courtesan's party. 'Had to,' muses Gertrud. 'That's the key word to everything.' Positing the unconscious as tragic destiny, *Gertrud* places narrative causality and free will in the same ambiguous category.

The earliest expression of Gertrud's identity, the poem cited above, comes in the epilogue, just before she tells Axel of the grave inscription she has chosen for herself, 'Amor Omnia'. The immediate juxtaposition of these framing badges (or shields) suggests that she has chosen her life, and lived it freely; yet what does this continuum say about her alleged past love for Gabriel and Erland? Having denied beauty, youth and life itself for an earlier love, she seems to have condemned herself to a compulsive replaying of a fixed past, which implies that her preoccupation with love may be little more than a form of arrested adolescence. Might we not conjecture that Dreyer's preoccupation with his mother, fixed during his own adolescence, led him to a comparable non-narrative impasse?

Throughout the film, this tension between freedom and obsession has been

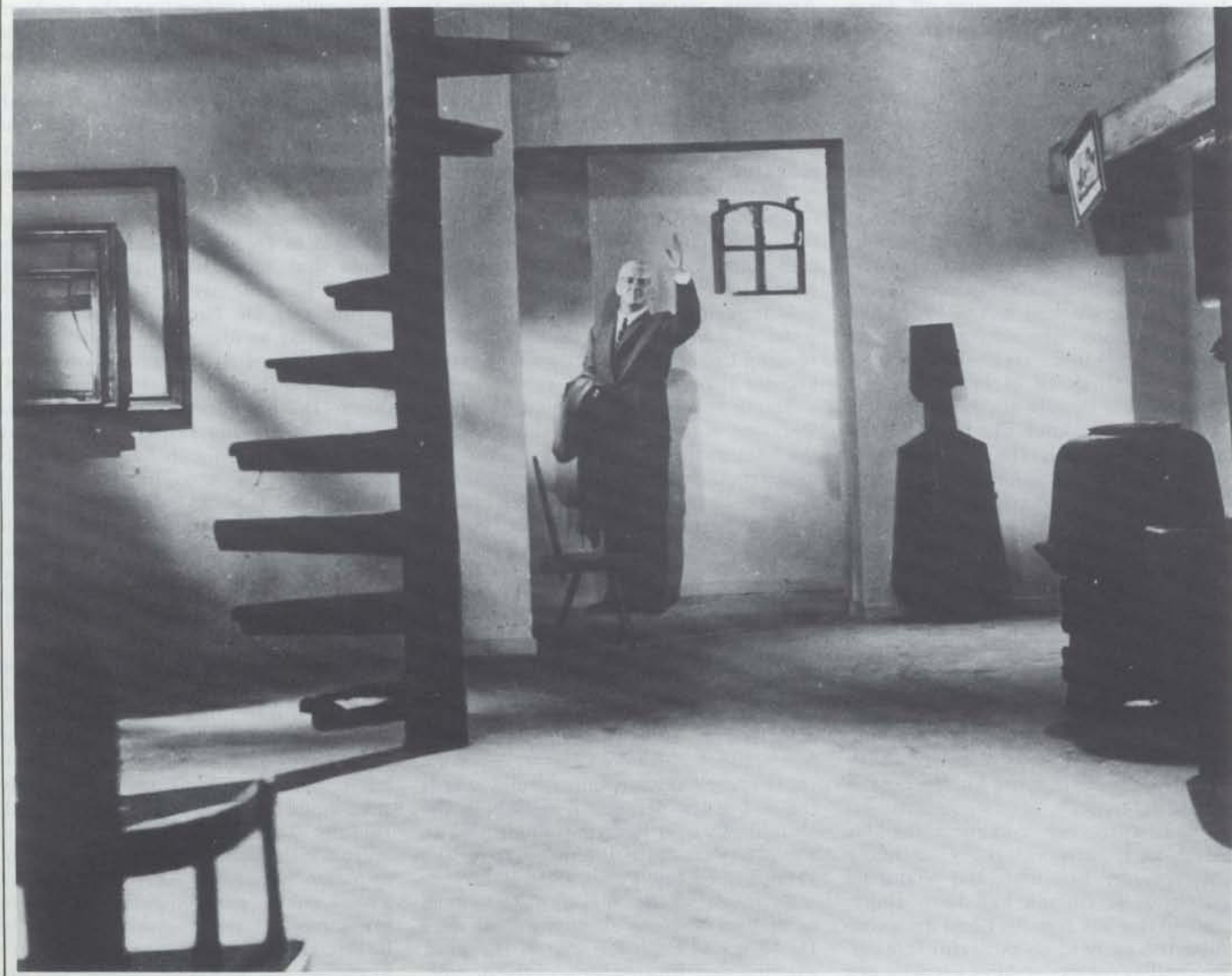
materially reproduced in a number of ways. Abrupt cuts to shots when the camera is already in motion (such as the rapid, rapturous track and pan accompanying Gertrud to her first rendezvous with Erland) convey at once the free flux of life and its sense of being achingly just out of reach; the suspension of direct sound for both the musical performances (Gertrud singing with Erland) and the offscreen, past-tense narration (Gustav in the carriage, Gertrud recounting both flashbacks) creates an otherworldly ambience that makes these passages seem to occur outside time. And just as the camera movements which follow the characters define a form of narrative suspension between the stretches of dialogue, the stationary set-ups recording the dialogue allow the words to take flight: continuous motion and continuous stasis are equally in evidence.

Depending upon their temperaments and predilections, critics have described the film as either full of or devoid of camera movements (rather than somewhere in between). Even a critic as sophisticated as David Bordwell, tied to an exclusively narrative model, can read *Gertrud* only as an 'empty film', interpreting non-narrative as absence rather than as a different form of presence. But the obsessive desire for the

image is as central to the meaning of *Gertrud* as the habitual desire for the story, and the furious, unceasing tug of war between these desires is the very source of the film's tragic rhythm. Only Axel, who accepts Gertrud as she is, escapes this tension: her husband must inquire why she is leaving him, her former lover asks repeatedly why she left him, and her present lover can only ask himself whether he loves her. It is only with Axel that Gertrud can have a true conversation, and when she returns his letters and he cheerfully burns them, their joint action is to refuse a narrative together, deny any riddle to be solved.

Insofar as this gesture reflects on Dreyer, it is an autobiographical gesture that paradoxically rejects autobiography. Like Gertrud's selection of her gravestone, or the film's final shot of a closed door, it represents an effort to forestall any future Drouzys. Transfixed by a static image of his mother, Dreyer enters a non-narrative realm which can be associated with both pre-birth and death—a state which both precedes and follows any need to acknowledge his father, any necessity to tell a story, placing narrative within parentheses. A work of perpetual time travel, *Gertrud* no less forcefully projects a suspended gaze and meditation on a frozen destiny, perfect yet appalling. ■

'Axel leaves Gertrud after they have said goodbye for the last time.'



Looking for

Mark Le Fanu *adventures of an ardent biographer in pursuit of an elusive star*



Mark Le Fanu.

No book or biography exists about Robert De Niro, the strongest and some would say most interesting male star to emerge from American cinema in the last twenty years. A short time ago chance almost put me in the position of being able to supply the gap. But the adventure never finally came off, for a variety of reasons, some of them my fault, some not. I learnt a number of things from the experience. The story I hope is entertaining in itself; the moral may or may not be instructive, not only for young would-be authors.

The commission in the first place was semi-accidental. I had been looking for someone to support a long-cherished project of mine, to write a book about Tarkovsky. My sister, herself a publisher—not, alas, of film books—passed me on to a colleague she had met in Frankfurt whose company specialised in large-format illustrated rock biographies. They were thinking of branching out into cinema. Friendly on the telephone, they invited me round. The projected list they had in mind, they immediately made it clear, was marketed towards the American rather than the European cinema; and among their priorities, a book about De Niro. Was I interested? What kind of a book, I asked? Well, either a biography, or a 'book of his films'. The details could be sorted out in due course. I thought the offer over carefully; it seemed, eventually, too good an opportunity to miss. There wasn't a book (as there were scores of books about the other stars: Eastwood, Newman, Brando, Dean). If it were crafted with any care at all, it must surely be the right thing to do.

What were my qualifications for undertaking such a task? Like many other people, my first and enduring experience of cinema had been Hollywood; in the 50s and 60s I had grown up under the sway of its powerful fantasy. The popular culture of America belonged

to me, as much as the popular culture of my native land, if not more so. Later, when I first seriously tried my hand at writing about film, it was for the magazine *Monogram*, whose policy under its founder and editor Thomas Elsaesser took it for granted that American cinema was *the* cinema to write about. None of the contributors was American himself, but it was unthinkable in the context of that time that this should be perceived as a disqualification. I remember vividly coming across the first issue of the magazine in a bookstore. Under the intriguing logo was a picture of Gloria Grahame stretched languidly on a sofa, in a scene from *The Big Heat*, which coincidentally I had only just that day ordered for my film club. Beneath, in bold lettering, the caption: 'Why Hollywood?' I knew, I think, almost without reading the article, that I would have to become a contributor.

The time I am writing about, the early 70s, was seeing a vital readjustment of the American film industry after the catastrophic collapse of the studios in the 60s—a readjustment which moved its focus, in part, from the West Coast to New York, and which coincided with the rise into prominence of stars like Pacino and De Niro, along with independent directors like Coppola, Friedkin, Altman, Scorsese, De Palma. One felt one was genuinely in at the birth of something new; privileged to be writing about it (in *Monogram*); privileged also, a little later, to live in America, where my fortunes had taken me on extended visits every summer. Later still, towards the end of the decade, living less in the United States, I had continued to write about aspects of its film industry for the French magazine *Positif*.

So much for my qualifications—such as they were. What about the challenge? De Niro had been the star of the most exciting and durable films of the decade.

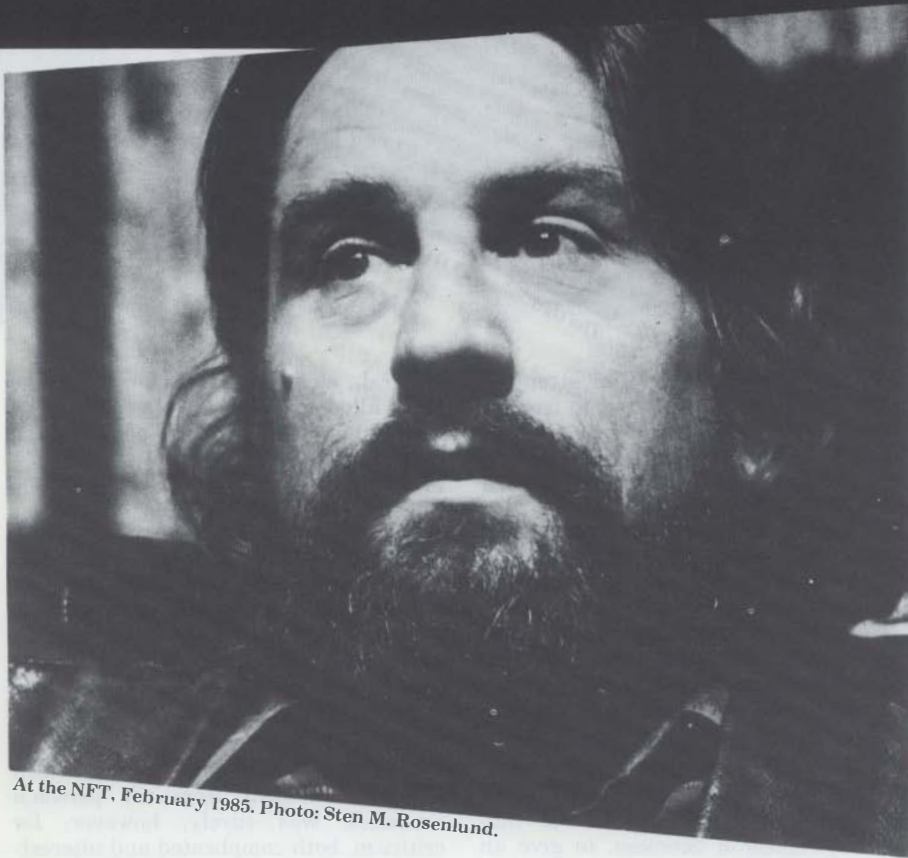
In pictures like *Taxi Driver*, *New York, New York*, *The Deer Hunter* and *Raging Bull*, it was impossible to believe that he himself didn't have more to do with the matter than was established by the mere limits of his role. He was in some way the creator, was he not, just as much as the director, or the scriptwriter or cameraman? Not to put the matter too pompously, to write about De Niro would be to take part in an essential task of modern film criticism: the delicate probing and extending of the *auteur* theory, whereby criticism comes more into line with the actual conditions under which movies are made.

There was a further challenge lying in wait for a hitherto unapologetic *auteurist* like myself, and that was: could I write about acting at all? It seems to me extraordinary now to have been writing about the cinema for so long without confronting the problem—almost without acknowledging its existence. In the theatre such casualness would be unthinkable: one has only to open the pages of a critic like Kenneth Tynan to see, again and again, that the confrontation with drama *is* the confrontation with acting—and with actors.

The immediate task was to get hold of De Niro himself. I had two leads that might have proved useful: Michel Ciment, my contact at *Positif*, having met De Niro and got on with him (as far as any stranger apparently did), promised to put in a word for me at Cannes. And then by coincidence De Niro's ex-assistant Patricia Slovo, yet another acquaintance of my sister, was arriving in England shortly and agreed to have lunch with me. Meanwhile I wrote off to De Niro's California-based agent. Only to receive an immediate, brief and unequivocal reply. The agent Harry Ufland informed me: 'Mr De Niro is not interested, as of this moment, in having a book written about him.'

Quite a blow. 'As of this moment.' Did that mean never, or simply not now? On the face of it the refusal was reasonable. But one didn't know whether that was what they always said. Was it a challenge, or was it a definitive no? Only time could make it clear. I considered, ruefully, my impecunious freelance status. If the commission had come from a major newspaper (say the *Sunday Times* colour supplement) there were pressures—or persuasions—that could be brought to bear, which simply weren't available to a writer acting on his

Mr De Niro



At the NFT, February 1985. Photo: Sten M. Rosenlund.

own. (I might have been flown out to California.) Thinking along these lines brought back to me the fact that, having accepted the publisher's advance, I had already, like most authors, spent three-quarters of it. And then again: having bitten into the project, I had hopes for it. In the circumstances it seemed reasonable to press on.

The catalogue heading under De Niro in the BFI library discloses at first glance a fairly thick folder of articles and interviews. But as one read into them, one discovered that the information contained in each new interview was similar to all intents and purposes to the information contained in the last. The few extant facts, recycled again and again, could basically be traced to one extensive interview, granted to Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* to coincide with the summer 1977 release of *New York, New York* in America. Here one learnt a bit about De Niro's mother and father and his bohemian upbringing in New York. There were anecdotes about his early stage struggles. A large part of the article (as with all subsequent articles) was given over to recalling the extraordinary professional exertions with which De Niro prefaced each of his roles. The stories were interesting as far as they went, but the fact that they turned up repeatedly meant that they could

only be of limited use to me. After all, it appeared that anyone who was the slightest bit interested in De Niro knew them already. Would that matter? How thinly could the biographical material be spread, if it had to be? Wavering, and at first optimistic, I came increasingly to the conclusion that there simply wasn't enough there in the archives for the purposes of the study I was planning.

A period of indecision set in, moving by degrees from frustration to paralysis, then to nightmare. I tried to get in touch with De Niro himself by writing to him personally; but the carefully composed letters went unanswered. Uncertain, at the best of times, of telephones—I have an irritating stutter which they accentuate—I tried phoning him at his New York number, 'lifted' by an obliging colleague from a hush-hush address book. No contact here either. (It says much about my disorientation that I didn't even know—couldn't discover—whether De Niro was filming at that moment.) Next I pulled out all the stops I could on his acquaintances, or would-be acquaintances. New York friends were urged to galvanise Martin Scorsese. Elia Kazan, an admirer of De Niro, met me for tea at Brown's Hotel, but immediately declined to discuss the matter. 'I'll tell you about him in New York,' he said.

New York! The time when I could afford to fly there was rapidly vanishing. But weren't there also English acquaintances? Didn't George Perry know him? Or Adrian Turner (who knew everybody)? Or England-based Terry Gilliam (whom I didn't know)? They were unable to make any promises. Nor could they, any more than anyone else, steer me towards the crucial meeting or interview—that day, a couple of days, in De Niro's presence that I believed would have made all the difference. In desperation, I remembered hearing of some English girls—possibly even traceable—who'd 'been with De Niro to a party'. Could they help? It passed through my mind that they perhaps knew as much that was fresh and interesting about the actor from an hour in his company as I'd gleaned in my months of research.

The book, meanwhile, was being written in fits and starts. I conceived of it now as a study of the films rather than a study of the actor, but even as such a study, the missing biographical information conspired to deprive it of a centre, so that the writing became diffuse and baroque and imbued, as it were, with a morose sense of despair. As I stumbled on painfully, I came to feel that the task would never be finished. Films which had not been announced when my project began, were completed, released and consigned to the archive before I could blink and acknowledge their existence. The 'Notes on Contributors' to another magazine that I write for grew so tired of announcing that I was 'writing a book on De Niro' that one day it imperceptibly passed on to saying that I *had* written it. (Not that there were many enquiries.) In the circumstances, the forced liquidation of my publishers, which would have been seen by others as a crowning catastrophe, took on, retrospectively, the status of reprieve. Perhaps I could fight to find other publishers. Perhaps, on the other hand, the liquidation was a heaven-sent sign that the author had done his best, and that the work could be honourably abandoned.

All this time, a space of nearly two years, I had never set eyes on De Niro. I had frequently dreamt of him, of course, but that was rather a different matter. (His appearances in my dreams were at times friendly, at other times hostile or sardonic.) Would I ever get to see him in the flesh? There were rumours, at odd moments, that he was coming to England—to London, or



Greetings (1968).

Bloody Mama (1969).

The Godfather, Pt II (1974).

Taxi Driver (1976).

Oxford—but' unfortunately I was no Rupert Pupkin to hide myself in hotel lobbies and pounce upon him unawares, even at the beginning of my project. At the end it was clear I had no fight for it. So it was with mixed feelings that I heard, early in 1985, that De Niro had agreed on a last-minute impulse to fly to England for an appearance at the NFT, to coincide with a season of his films. Perhaps seeing him now, knowing that I could do nothing about it, would be painful. Naturally, I went along anyway.

The interview, to be conducted by Chris Auty, was preceded by clips from *Greetings* (an early De Palma), *The Deer Hunter*, *Godfather II* and *King of Comedy*. Short as they were, they were an electrifying reminder of his abilities. In comedy he is wonderfully voluble and articulate. The part of Pupkin, which I had disliked on first seeing *The King of Comedy*, came across this time round as governed by a mad, vulnerable, frantic charm. As for the clip of the roulette game in the floating cage in *The Deer Hunter*, this is surely the most intense dramatic sequence in modern cinema. De Niro's anger and contempt towards his captors, his fierce will to live and his will to make Walken live, the vigour and authority of his movements, are modulated in the scene, in acting terms, with a conviction and seriousness that we will be lucky to see surpassed in our lifetimes. One sees afresh that this kind of acting is the unique contribution of American cinema to the total stock of theatrical traditions. Also, it must be said, how distinguished it is, in its vigour and moral forthrightness...

The lights went on and the interview began. De Niro was bearded and looked like Scorsese, who was seated elsewhere in the auditorium. Auty is a genial and knowledgeable interviewer, but his leads failed throughout the evening to elicit from De Niro anything that might conceivably be called a conversation. It was not that the actor was hostile or truculent, merely overwhelmingly diffident—overwhelmingly taciturn. The interview began to take on a strange

spookiness. One had the strongest possible impression of seeing in front of one's eyes an illustration of the old beliefs from stories, that the actor has no other personality than the personality or the role he impersonates. Uncanny, if it were true—and how unlike the rest of us—that De Niro should live so vibrantly on screen, but in the flesh be reduced to a cipher.

He told us mumbly who his favourite actors were (but it was as if he had been asked many times). He couldn't remember who was his favourite author. He refused to be drawn on Belushi, or on the important 1975 mix-up with Mike Nichols. Above all there was nothing in his replies, as there was in the subsequent replies of Scorsese, to give an indication that one was listening to a man of address, of authority; a man possessed, shall we say, of a personal culture. So that was it, then. All along I had been searching for a life—and perhaps there was no life to discover. De Niro was a ghost: the real De Niro breathed only on celluloid. The ban placed by his agent on any books about him might almost have been expressly made so that this 'secret' should never become public.

Auty's sensible words afterwards disabused me of these dangerously Jamesian speculations. Of course the man had a private life; he was simply jealous of talking about it—a rare individualist, just as the newspapers said he was, in a milieu whose gossip industry succeeds in reducing everything personal to a uniform and dust-coated level of banality. Still, it will not surprise readers that I made no effort to get in touch with De Niro at the subsequent NFT reception: after that incident I knew more than ever that it was useless. Someone else, possibly—not I—was destined to be his biographer. Yet it struck me that I might have known this not merely earlier, but from the beginning. For the secret excellence of American cinema is not verbal and literary, as is the cinema and theatre of other cultures, including our own, but

visceral, elemental and demotic. The scene alluded to from *The Deer Hunter* is fuelled by such a barrage of oaths and profanities as one has never heard before in staged drama. Violence of language, like violence of gesture, has a particular and appropriate status in American films of the 70s, and the prose that would capture and make sense of this cinema must itself be prepared to dwell in those cadences, and handle them easily, without embarrassment. One's talents perhaps (despite all those years with *Monogram*) were simply not right for the undertaking.

The general problem, if I may detach it for a moment from my personal anxieties, was surely, however, for criticism, both complicated and interesting. I had observed its machinations working through the recent writings of a critic I admire, David Thomson—this desire by an Englishman fascinated by American cinema to move out into America itself, to liberate its idiom for the purposes of his own angry interpretative intelligence. Maybe the effort here wasn't quite successful; and Thomson, in becoming a sassier journalist, had become a less honest, less 'classical' critic. There are advantages after all (one might have thought on reading his recent American-composed writing, and comparing it to the marvellous *Biographical Dictionary of the Cinema*), in keeping one's distance.

On this note I had better say that the most interesting English article on De Niro's acting ability that I read in the course of my researches appeared in the *New Musical Express*. The occasion was the release of *Once Upon a Time in America*; the author, Ian Penman, a rock critic I'd already come across in the early 80s when for various reasons I subscribed to the paper. His style, like the style of most rock journalism, was flashy and preening; there was a redundancy of reference, in this particular article, to fashionable intellectual icons (Barthes, Derrida, Nietzsche) maybe not legitimately assimilated. But the interest of the writing came from the overpowering



New York, New York (1977).

The Deer Hunter (1978).

Raging Bull (1980).

The King of Comedy (1982).

sense that its author was in tune not only with the articulacies but also with the inarticulacies of American living. He could write about De Niro, as I could not, because in some sense he identified with the class position, or rather (I hope this is not too complicated) with the class *positionlessness*, of the persona. Thus it occurred to me finally that one has to have deeply felt two things to write well about the De Niro myth, and encompass it: first, the anger of the urban dispossessed classes; secondly, and against this, a disdainful, aristocratic individualism.

What is, or was, De Niro's 'class position', anyway? It was something that intrigued me right from the beginning, in the *Newsweek* interview. De Niro's father, Bobby, still alive, was a professional artist, and the young De Niro was brought up against the background of the so-called golden age of New York painting. Journalists, painters and intellectuals, if we are to believe Jack Kroll, were everyday figures in his household—which was not for that reason 'middle-class', but casual and bohemian, much in the manner of artistic life in Paris in the 20s. The first steps towards becoming an actor were taken by De Niro by the time he was sixteen; from which time there was never any wavering. What most strikes one now about his subsequent major roles is how much—against his own background—these roles incarnate uneducated or working-class life-styles. It is as if De Niro—like Scorsese, and also like many other Americans—utopianly straddles the divide between the two great classes in our society. And he is able to do this because, by some hard to grasp rule in America, the *perception* of that division simply isn't deemed to exist.

It was something that I sensed all along, even while I couldn't interpret it properly. To me, for instance, it is wonderful, and completely different from the English tradition, that, in preparing for the role of La Motta in

Raging Bull, De Niro was able to walk out into his own neighbourhood, and take in afresh the voices and gestures and passages of style that he had observed from the streets in his childhood. Greenwich Village, where De Niro was raised, and the Bronx, where La Motta hails from, are different areas of New York; but the difference is not one that matters. The role of La Motta was essentially there in his bones, and didn't have to be pastiched or confected. In America it is almost as if, democratically, any actor can play any role naturally, just as any citizen can aspire to be President.

But (it was a really big but) there was also a corollary to this. With all these various opportunities, the roles that De Niro had taken were still, in some important sense, narrow and out of the range of my sympathy. Why were they always so physical, so poised on the borders of the articulate? One was not asking for a 'cinema of intellectuals', such as one had seen for years represented on the European screen. But is it not curious that De Niro and Scorsese, themselves middle-class intellectuals, in

With Meryl Streep, *Falling in Love* (1984).



fact if not in desire, should come back again and again by preference to dramatic situations governed not by the intellect, but by instinct and habit and violence?

Take *Raging Bull* as example. As far as human responsibility is concerned—responsibility to wife, family, career—the boxer, La Motta, is portrayed by De Niro as wilfully stupid. There is, as it were, despite sleights of hand on the director's part, no clear tragic insight into his errors and unkindnesses—which is why the film is so maddening. The protagonist never achieves any true clarity about himself, but remains in the category of persons named by Andrew Sarris (in a discussion of the Victor McLaglen parts in John Ford films) as 'lumbering' or 'sub-Aristotelian'. What insights there are, are governed by drink and self-pity. The language of the film is disgusting and scatological. Yet it does seem to me in the end that *Raging Bull* is magnificent—as great, in fact, as any recent work of film one has come across. For its subject is nothing other than the limits of the human body, and the soul's imprisonment in its mortal frame—the poor mortal frame of the boxer La Motta—observed, on the realistic and metaphorical level, under an intensity of pressure that can only properly be described as religious.

Nowhere else known to me in modern art—not in the paintings of Bacon or of De Kooning, those ambiguous rhetorical masterpieces—has the flesh been so piteously and relentlessly put under scrutiny as in the noble, dumb gyrations of De Niro's great portrait of *Raging Bull*. Thus it is that a film whose story, on the surface, could not be less intellectual, finds access, through the poetry and seriousness of its treatment, to a region of universality denied to many works of more obviously 'intelligent' provenance. To me, this is the importance and fascination of De Niro's acting; and the reason why one Englishman (against the odds) should have spent a significant period of his life in attempting to penetrate its mysteries. ■

ALMENDROS



Improper Conduct: Orlando Jimenez Leal, Nestor Almendros.

...and Documentary

Nestor Almendros' documentary **Improper Conduct**, interviews with exiles from Cuba, has a special significance for the Cuban-born cinematographer, whose autobiography **A Man with a Camera** was published in Britain last year. Recently Almendros showed his film to an audience at New York University, answered questions, and talked about documentary in general and **Improper Conduct** in particular.

If you count feet of film, I have probably done more as a documentary filmmaker than as a director of photography on fiction films. I began in documentary. In Cuba I was in the newsreels, in television, and I would go out and shoot film every day. In France, in the early 60s, I shot countless 16mm documentaries for school television. And I worked on several feature documentaries: Rossellini's *Pompidou Centre*; *Idi Amin Dada*, *Koko*, *the Talking Gorilla* and *The Valley*, with Barbet Schroeder. I have always held to documentaries, and there's a documentary approach in

my way of lighting fiction features.

When Orlando Jimenez Leal and I made *Improper Conduct*, our main idea, in terms of style, was that the best documentary is found in the rushes themselves. Unfortunately, rushes are always too long: we had about forty hours of screen time. But to keep that quality of the rushes, we decided that the film should be edited in the simplest, most unadorned way. With time, I've come to reject the reconstructed documentary that I admired in my youth—Flaherty, Ivens. I mean the documentary in which there is too much *mise en scène*.

I believe that the less *mise en scène*, the better.

Effectively, the editing of *Improper Conduct* consisted of condensing the rushes. We thought the 'seams' should be visible. If audiences perceived that there was a jump cut—that we had eliminated part of an interview—so much the better. When something is cut, audiences should know it. Though there was a minimum of editing, I think we should have done even less. The film wanted to be anti-Ivens, anti-Bela Balasz, anti-Riefenstahl. Our models were film-makers like Jean Rouch and Albert Maysles, for whom sound is so important, almost more important than the image. That might seem a paradox, coming from a cinematographer. But before we started shooting, we told Daniel Delmau, the soundman, and Dominique Merlin, the cameraman assigned to us by French television, that the priority should be sound. We told Merlin: If you have to get closer to avoid seeing the microphone, we'll get closer and sacrifice the image if we must. What

counted was what people had to say, and that is why we did the film mainly in Spanish, to keep the spontaneity of the testimonies, although the producers, Antenne 2, wanted us to do it in French, and in America, when we first tried unsuccessfully to get backing, they told us it should be in English.

Our main concern was simply that the faces of the people we interviewed should be seen. The cinematography was to have no special lighting effects. Faces would be seen frontally, because in profile one sees only half of the truth in the face. We were very careful that the eyeline of our witnesses should be as close as possible to the lens. Orlando and I were putting our cheeks against the camera while Dominique Merlin was filming. We wanted the audience to feel that the people being interviewed were almost talking to them. Before we started shooting we screened a number of documentaries, including one we greatly admire, *The Sorrow and the Pity*. But we were surprised to realise that some of the interviews there were shot in profile: it was the voice that actually carried the message, and the faces were almost lost.

We didn't use background music. When there is music in the film, it's because we had 'borrowed' an excerpt from a film by someone else who had put music to it. Such as the official Cuban documentary about the Peruvian Embassy events in 1980, where the director used drums and some kind of electronic music. We left that as it was, image and sound, because we felt this was part of the document, or of the pseudo-document. It showed the way the Cuban government had manipulated the images, the kind of information Cubans have access to today. And the same with the 'borrowed' documentary footage early on, when you see the anti-Batista guerrillas and then Castro arriving in Havana. We found that in the French television archives. And we left it just as it was, portraying Castro as some kind of myth and with that 'heroic' music.

We filmed interviews with about forty people, and there are twenty-eight left in the film. Not that the others were un-

interesting. In fact, we have published a book in Spain with what was left of the rushes. We knew that we didn't want any whining, any tears. There have been too many documentaries of that kind. It's easy to move people by having someone tell a terrible story of despair and imprisonment with tears in their eyes. Some of our witnesses were too dramatic; some were too powerful, like Severo Sarduy, one of the greatest writers in Spanish and a Cuban dissident exiled in Paris. His interview was so strong that the only place for it would have been at the end of the movie. It would have been structurally impossible to fit it in anywhere else. And from the first time we saw the rushes, we thought we should end on René Ariza, with his broken speech and lost eyes.

It might seem a difficult job, just tracking these people down. For a film like this, you need a team of people helping on research, and we did it practically single-handed, calling people on the telephone. And all between movies, because I was doing *Pauline at the Beach* at the time. Telephone bills! That was the big expense on *Improper Conduct*. But of course there were people we interviewed whom we knew well: Carlos Franqui, former director of the newspaper *Revolucion*, the dissident writer Reinaldo Arenas, Dr Martha Frayde, who had been Cuba's ambassador at UNESCO, the writer Cabrera Infante. And Europe is small to the point that we were able to leave Paris in the morning, film Cabrera Infante in London in the afternoon, and be back in Paris by dinner-time.

How long did the project take from its inception?

I would say about twenty-five years... Ever since we left Cuba, we had the idea that one day we would do a film about the betrayal of the ideas of the Revolution. There was a moment when both Orlando and I felt guilty that we were in a position to make such a film and we hadn't done it. We were both at the height of our careers: I had recently won an Academy Award; Orlando was very successful with his company, which does tv commercials in New York. And that

coincided with the Mariel exodus, the boat people coming from the Mariel port in Cuba in 1980. These were quite different people from the first wave of exiles in the 60s. There were many blacks and working-class people, and the stories they brought out were so striking, so horrible, that we thought, well, something has to be done. We could borrow an Eclair, we could get short ends of film stock. Before getting French tv to produce it, we had done some shooting on our own.

We had no editorial interference of any kind from French television: they were really extraordinary. *Improper Conduct* was made for a series called *Résistance*, which deals with repression and dissidence all over the world. They hadn't done any programme about Cuba. I remember that I began explaining our project to the head of programming, Michel Thoulouze, and he said: 'Stop! Don't say any more.' I insisted: 'Let me finish. Perhaps I'll convince you.' He interrupted: 'I'm already convinced. Go ahead and shoot it.' So we did *Improper Conduct*, and we had *carte blanche* about content. As usual with French television, the budget was very small, but we had free access to the tv archive material, which otherwise would have cost us about \$100,000. And we were a small crew: one cameraman, one soundman, one grip/gaffer, Orlando and me. We would just plug in the lights ourselves, help carry the equipment and so on. The total shooting time was about three weeks, with interruptions because of travel.

Of course, most of the films about Cuba in the French television archives are propaganda movies in favour of Castro. So we used parts of them only as some kind of anti-illustration of our subject. The only foreign film-makers invited to Cuba are those known to be sympathetic to the regime. The authorities are distrustful: which is why, for instance, the Cuban episode of *Godfather II* had to be done in the Dominican Republic, though Coppola asked Castro if he could film in Havana. Many people regret that we didn't shoot *Improper Conduct* in Cuba. So do we. But you have to understand that as

Improper Conduct. Left: Guillermo Cabrera Infante and his wife, Myriam Gomez. Right: Fidel Castro and Dr Martha Frayde in the 1960s.



ALMENDROS

...and Documentary

exiles we are officially considered 'vermin', 'scum' (*gusanos, escoria*). We have absolutely no standing there. It took me twenty years to get a seven-day visa to visit my family, and then I was not allowed to stay with them. I had to take a hotel room...

How did you get some of the documents out? Some of the prisoners' sentences looked like official documents.

Yes. René Ariza, for instance, had kept his sentence, and he sneaked it out. But the sad thing is that in a dictatorship the rulers are proud of a sentence like that... Many people who saw *Idi Amin Dada*, which I photographed for Barbet Schroeder, were surprised at some of the things we were allowed to film. Well, Amin was very proud of what we were filming: he thought it was marvellous. And the same thing with Ariza's sentence. The Cuban judges stated bluntly in print that this man was condemned to eight years in prison because his writings 'attacked Fidel Castro and the martyrs of the Revolution' and because they 'lacked literary value'. To them, that seemed a perfectly valid reason to imprison someone: they probably let Ariza take the sentence out because they thought it would be a good example and a deterrent. In Cuba, more than anywhere, people have to know the law. Capital punishment was re-established by the Revolution: that's the law, it's written and printed. The age at which someone could be sent to prison was lowered to sixteen: that's there too.

In *Improper Conduct*, we had a story to tell, and we got people to help us tell it... In my book *A Man with a Camera*, I talk about becoming disappointed with *cinéma vérité* style documentaries because of waiting for things to happen—and if they do happen, often they are not significant enough. So I have come back to a time-honoured method which is almost as old as sound cinema: the interview. Dziga Vertov used it in his early sound documentary *Three Songs about Lenin* (1934). There's a wonderful interview with a woman worker describing an accident at the factory, and I think that is the first time it was done in films. And the GPO films made in Britain in the 30s also used the interview technique. Someone talking to the director, to the audience... We came back to that, simple as it may be. Tell me a better method.

I learned this shooting *Idi Amin Dada* in Uganda. We filmed him swimming, playing the accordion, ordering his army about—the usual television journalism. But I believe the best moments in the film are those in which the tripod is

there and the dictator talks to the camera. There is the great occasion when Amin starts telling us about his dreams; Barbet Schroeder was very shrewd to ask him about that. Everyone likes to describe their dreams, and Amin was just crazy to talk about himself. We were told that later, in Israel, a psychoanalyst did a report on Amin based on the things he talked about in our film. And they used it for the Entebbe rescue, to estimate how he might react to a surprise attack.

Can you talk a little about your perception of light, and the use of light, gained through your experience in documentary?

I saw that things looked beautiful lit by nature, so why not use this method for fiction? For instance, I filmed the bonfire of St John in Corsica for a documentary for French school television. In one scene where children were watching the fire, I simply shot it as it was, with fast film, with only the flames lighting the faces. It looked terrific. So I was waiting for a feature that would give me the chance to use this method, a film people would see, because all those documentaries, no one sees them. My film 'manifesto' is Eric Rohmer's *La Collectionneuse* (1966). With *Days of Heaven*, and also *The Blue Lagoon*, I was given the chance to use these methods on a bigger scale. In night exteriors in *The Blue Lagoon*, Brooke Shields, Christopher Atkins and the cannibals were lit by the bonfire... It's really quite simple, and once a technique is known, of course anyone can use it successfully. Take a film as commercial as *Conan the Barbarian*, which had beautiful scenes with torches that actually lit. You see a period movie made ten years earlier and the torches light nothing. Of course, positioning the people in relation to the light—whether it's torchlight, window light or electric lamps—is the main thing. I believe the painters of the past can help us a great

deal with this. Take Caravaggio: it's obvious that in his studio there was only one skylight, high up on the left. All his paintings have this single light source. And what a variety!

You have said that when you are working on a feature you try to get into the director's mind, to see it the way he wants to see it. What happens if you get inside and don't like the view? How do you resolve that?

I don't resolve it. It doesn't work. The film is dead, and I will try not to work with that director again. But no experience is useless, because one can learn even from making a bad movie. Things that one won't do again. Every subject brings ideas, especially the most far-fetched. You learn from your mistakes, but it isn't a pleasure, especially when you realise that the director doesn't know what he wants, that he's quite lost—which often happens. There are some who do know what they want, but what they want is awful and that's even worse. When they don't know, you can always throw out some ideas, make some experiments, at least have fun. But the worst thing is when directors push you into using fog filters and things that you are against, morally speaking.

I've known directors who say, 'Just do what I tell you.' But I've found that the best take the cinematographer's input into account, even if they don't accept a specific suggestion. They allow, 'Okay, perhaps you're right. Let's try it.' Later they might contradict you again, but this often leads to constructive discussion. In any case, there is always some margin, some leeway left to us cinematographers. The director might say, 'Get me this person in close-up.' But a close-up how? Here? There? So without even discussing it, the cinematographer decides how close that close-up is—side, front or three-quarter. Often the director is simply too busy with other things; he

Idi Amin Dada: Barbet Schroeder interviews Amin.



can't make decisions about every little detail.

When you are shooting a feature, you have almost any tool you might need available to you . . .

In America, yes. Not in Europe, not in France. And when one is doing a documentary, one certainly doesn't have the tools. For instance, if we had been able to shoot *Improper Conduct* in 35mm, it would obviously have been better. No blow-ups to make the 35mm prints; no loss of quality. In documentary, people should look like they really are, and 35mm is closer to reality than 16mm. The truth in a person, or the lie in a person, would have been more apparent in 35mm. But of course that is unthinkable for a documentary.

As to lighting equipment on the film, we only had one Lowel light, the foldable soft Lowel light, and two quartz. That was all. Much of the time we used natural lighting, and white panels of styrofoam to reflect daylight. When we interviewed Dr Martha Frayde, we actually only used the light coming through her window—Vermeer's technique.

How much preliminary work did you do on the interviews? Did you interview the subjects off-camera before you filmed them?

I did the interviews first on paper; our production wasn't rich enough to interview directly on film, so we had to be sure beforehand that each witness would have something interesting to say. It was a great advantage that there were two of us making the film. I would fill Orlando in before we went out to shoot. So, when he was asking the questions, the person being interviewed didn't realise that Orlando already knew the answers. If they had spoken to me again, with the camera, there wouldn't have been the same spontaneity.

We didn't want to get into 'psycho-drama' with the interviews. We wanted

rather to appeal to people's intelligence and humour. Orlando is a very cheerful person, and this had an influence. People were ready to laugh. And we wanted to keep this in the movie because it's part of the Hispanic soul, and particularly of the Caribbean people. Laughing at adversity is their secret weapon. We thought that was the best revenge for an exile: to laugh even at the terrible things that have happened. But there is no doubt that the person asking the questions has a great influence on the answers. That's why *Improper Conduct* is 'our' movie. And that is perhaps the only *mise en scène* we allowed ourselves.

There are always surprises in filming. Some people are wonderful in private but terrified in front of a lens. Others start projecting the moment they see a camera. They sense that what they might have been saying for twenty years was of no importance, but *now* it becomes important because it is going to be permanently on film. And some people surprised us—and themselves, as they told us afterwards—by talking more about their pasts than they had ever done before.

How did you decide on the order of the interviews?

The film is divided into three sections, though I hope that is not obvious, because when structure is too clear in a documentary it becomes too pedagogical. The first part has the innocent testimonies. By innocent, I mean people who are not intellectuals. Because intellectuals tend to have too much going on in their minds, and reality can be distorted by too much thinking. In this first part there are people to whom awful things had happened in Cuba, and they just described them straightforwardly. We thought the audience would care all the more about what had happened to them because they were so obviously victims with no political background or ideas. In the second part, there were the

intellectuals who would reflect on what these people had said—Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Juan Goytisolo, Susan Sontag, Heberto Padilla. And the third part was, again, going down the roller-coaster to hell—the people who really had the most terrible experiences. We also took the chronology into account: the first interviews relate to things that happened in the 60s, like the UMAP camps. Then we discussed the 'rehabilitation' camps of the 70s. And third, what happened during the Mariel exodus of the 80s.

Why did we start the film with the ten dancers who defected from the National Ballet of Cuba in Paris as late as 1966? Well, because our film was French. People only want to know about what they already know, and the French knew about that event, because it had been a big press story at the time and because some of the dancers went on to work and become known in France. We were talking about something that had happened there, in France. If we could catch the audience's attention in the first few moments, we were sure that they would stay with us and not switch channels.

At one time, we were thinking of doing the story of the ten dancers as a fiction film, something along the lines of a Cuban *To Be or Not To Be*. The documentary was intended to be the research for the fiction film; and then the research became the film. Perhaps the fiction film will be done some day, but not now, and not by me. I don't want to become a director; I'm very happy with my job as a cinematographer.

For a documentary, *Improper Conduct* has been very successful. Did you anticipate that, and how did you go about distributing it?

Its success has surprised us, although our audience in America has mainly been in New York and Miami. Documentaries can only go to specialised cinemas, festivals, universities or television. *Improper Conduct* has been shown by French, Spanish and Scandinavian television, with exceptional ratings. Now it will be shown on television in Germany, South America and the United States.

What was the reaction of the Cuban exiles in Miami?

Extraordinary. Something we didn't expect is that people cried. I have said that we wanted to appeal to the intelligence rather than to feelings. But of course this particular audience had never before had their problems portrayed on the screen, so there were some very emotional reactions. In Miami the film played for fifteen weeks in two cinemas. That's where we got a really big audience, as will happen some day if the film can be shown openly in Cuba.

There is a lot of anti-gay feeling in the Cuban community exiled in Miami. How did people who are both anti-Castro and anti-gay react to the research on the persecution of homosexuals in your film?

Some people were a little uneasy. But

Improper Conduct: The transvestite Caracol, one of the Mariel exiles.



ALMENDROS

...and Documentary

that is why I think the project of *Improper Conduct* was interesting, criss-crossing the lines on two different kinds of prejudice, making each side do some rethinking. Incidentally, I suspect that is also one reason why the film hasn't gone further in some areas. It has not, I mean, been taken up by the establishment in the United States. For instance, we were interviewed by Bill Buckley on his television show *Firing Line*, and one could tell that he was a little uneasy about the whole thing. On the one hand, he wanted to make a case against Castro. On the other hand, he even said, 'Why didn't you talk instead about the nuns that have been persecuted?' So that contradiction can only please us. Even if we got a smaller audience, we probably got the better audience.

Could you have got funding for the film in the United States, perhaps from the Cuban community?

If we had tried harder, we might have found it. Now that the film is finished,

the Cuban exile community on the whole likes it. But not at first, when it was only an idea, a project. We tried Public Television in the United States and we tried CBS and ABC. I could tell they didn't like the angle on the subject, although they weren't too clear about their objections. But I believe it was the slant we took, the fact that the homosexual subject was there. Also, admittedly, the fact that we didn't envisage an English-speaking anchorman, a sort of obligation which we would not have accepted. Ironically, there is another obstacle to getting financing in the United States: some obscure guilt complex, perhaps, about past policies south of the Rio Grande. The intelligentsia in America still feels uneasy about a head-on indictment of the Castro regime. Isn't it significant that Hollywood has yet to spend a penny on an anti-Castro film, when there have been several films directed at right-wing Latin American dictators—Pinochet in *Missing* and Somoza in *Under Fire*?

When you make a documentary, do you think of the work as 'art'?

Not at all. I said that I wanted *Improper Conduct* to look like rushes. I believe there is something basically dishonest about being 'artistic' in documentary. As a matter of fact, after we 'cleaned' the rushes by eliminating the valueless material, we ended up with eight hours that were interesting. We put the

footage into chronological order and invited an audience to a private screening in Paris. These were mostly Latin Americans: Colombians, Mexicans, Argentinians, etc. Not too many Cubans: we thought they would be too partial. And no French people, unless they spoke Spanish fluently, because at that stage there were no subtitles. We brought in beer and Cokes and sandwiches, and people stayed the eight hours. That, to me, was the real film, and the audience reactions were very useful in deciding what we should keep in the final editing. This was the preview technique I learned from Robert Benton.

Americans enjoy the big budget, very slick movies. Do you think that makes American audiences less receptive to documentaries?

It has always been that way. Commercial films of the past were, relatively speaking, more slick and documentaries more primitive. I would say that this is the best moment. In the past, a film like *Improper Conduct* would have had no distribution at all. But now you get some of these documentaries shown commercially in the big cities at least for two or three weeks. There's a little bit more curiosity, in spite of, or because of, television. If we think that television is no different from cinema—and in my opinion television is simply a branch of cinema—then documentary has become big. ■

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JOHN BOORMAN

'Round up the usual suspects...'

National Heroes, by Alexander Walker. Harrap, £10.95.

British Cinema Now, edited by Martyn Auty and Nick Roddick. British Film Institute, £9.50 (paperback £4.95).

'It almost seems as if more books about the cinema are being published annually than movies are being made.' Thus wrote Gilbert Adair in this journal in 1982. Since then the books have kept coming, and many of them have taken 'The British Film Industry' as their text. Besides the two under review, they include *A Night at the Pictures* (Ten Decades of British Film) by Gilbert Adair and Nick Roddick, *The Big Book of British Films* by Robin Cross, *British Cinema History* by James Curran and Vincent Porter, *Learning to Dream* (The New British Cinema) by James Park, *The Great British Picture Show* by George Perry, *The British Film Collection 1896-1984* by Patricia Warren, and *The Once and Future Film* (British Cinema in the 70s and 80s) by John Walker. Perhaps this reflects a society sliding ever further into services rather than manufacturing, where people become social workers helping the homeless rather than builders constructing homes.

We remaining practitioners call film-making not *an* industry but *the* industry. How tempting to see it as a metaphor for the ills and impending demise of the British industry itself, and it proves irresistible to most of these authors despite their protestations to the contrary. Inevitably, their source material is limited if not withering and shrinking. The same scenario is reworked and retitled—a familiar Hollywood ruse—and of course they draw on the same cast of players. What else can they do? As Claude Rains said in *Casablanca*, 'Round up the usual suspects.'

British subject: John Boorman with Nigel Terry, Arthur in his *Excalibur*.



...usual suspects.'

There is dashing David, whose Errol Flynn derring-do has snatched Oscars from the jaws of insolvency. These scholarly books become fan magazines in his presence. Did he grow his beard to ape his hero Kubrick, speculates Alex Walker, or to conceal his resemblance to Paul McCartney? They talk about 'Post-Puttnam', conjuring a surreal image of David wrapped in an envelope (addressed to Harvard University?) being stuffed into a letter-box.

There is Lew Grade, shamelessly overplaying his impersonation of Lew Grade, the all-dancing, all-talking comic turn, not forgetting his sibling Bernard Delfont. The Grade Brothers are an exact cross between the Warner Brothers and the Marx Brothers. *Raise the Titanic* might have brought ruin and ignominy, but Lew was ready with a quip (Aw again): 'It would have been cheaper to lower the Atlantic.' I don't wish to know that.

Jake Eberts rides into town. He came from nowhere (unless it was Harvard, whither flies Puttnam), he fashioned Goldcrest out of a dust bowl, made it a good place where decent folk could make movies unmolested, a place where promises were fulfilled, and when there was a dangerous journey to LA to be made, why, Jake would ride shotgun. But the folk didn't appreciate him, didn't know how well off they were, and one day Jake upped and rode away all alone on his trusty Concorde. The bad guys moved in and it was all carousing and spending over at Goldcrest and the Devil take the hindmost. Soon as Jake was gone, they had left their modest homesteads and built a glittering saloon in Soho where they frittered away Jake's hard-earned pay dirt. Things got so bad they finally went to Jake and begged him to take back his badge. In the last reel, too recent for these two books, Jake is back, shooting from the hip, cleaning up the town. A lot of blood has been spilled. Will Jake stay, or will the lure of the open skies and old Concorde beckon again?

Barry Spikings and Michael Deeley do a remake of *Room at the Top*. They claw their way up to the summit of EMI but find themselves hanging on by their fingertips and along comes Bernard Delfont to stamp on their hands. The fall is a long one and no stunt men to do it for them. Don Boyd (the Boyd Wonder, Alex shamelessly calls him) plays the good-young-guy-gone-wrong. When Father Alex comes along he breaks down right away and confesses not only his venial sins—like plagiarism through ignorance in *East of Elephant Rock*—but his guilt and shame for *The Honky Tonk Freeway*, which became EMI's *Heaven's Gate*.

While these writers share the same material, their tones differ. They fall loosely into two categories, the doctors



Waking up to the 70s. Glenda Jackson in *Sunday*, *Bloody Sunday*.

and the undertakers. The patient is mortally sick but, something of a ham actor, he takes an unconscionable time a-dying. In an old British movie, the scene would show the solid family doctor at the bedside, his infuriatingly underplayed imperceptible shake of the head, then a discreet well-laundered sheet elegantly crossing the frame to cover the cadaver. Cut to the graveside: rain, black umbrellas, a suggestion of tears behind tasteful veils. Alec Guinness suddenly sits up in the coffin. British films are still alive! It's Ealing!

But here in the 80s it's a scene from a Cannon movie. The patient is wired and tubed to a life-support system while a team of doctors wrangle over the nature of the disease. Over-emphatic close-ups of the high-tech equipment show the faltering vital signs, weakening blips on the soundtrack. One of the surgeons attempts to switch off the machine, but his hand is seized by another and they wrestle for control of the dreaded lever. Another fellow starts to punch the patient violently in the chest, trying to get the heart started, from which the critic (sorry, doctor) seems to derive sadistic pleasure, but we are forced to agree it is for the patient's own good.

'*Britannia Hospital* was still open for business,' is Alexander Walker's conclusion in *National Heroes*, 'but that perpetual patient, the British Film Industry, needed to have a lot of faith in the doctors treating it.' Walker avoids an overt prognosis himself, yet his brilliant and laser-accurate account of the symptoms is often painful to read and harries the reader towards unhappy conclusions. Along the way he eagerly celebrates any hopeful signs, reminding one of the *New Yorker* cartoon where

the doctor tells the just-widowed wife, 'First the good news, we've got his temperature down.'

National Heroes is serious, superbly written and insightful, and I will return to it after disposing of the other book I am required to consider, *British Film Now*, a collection of essays and sermons by no less than eleven authors, none of whom are identified as to their competence or authority. What they mostly have in common is a turgid prose style that, as a Governor of the BFI, I have come to recognise with sinking heart as the murky *lingua franca* of that otherwise noble body. Indeed it is under the Institute's imprimatur that this work is published. It is hard to say what this book is, or who it is intended to please. Its introduction makes some bizarre claims as to what it is not...

'This book is an attempt to avoid the twin poles of much (British) film writing, which has veered from the gushingly aesthetic to the snottily dismissive.' And: 'Most books about the British cinema begin with an apology of one kind or another—by the writer for bothering to write about it at all; or, more usually, by the writer for the awfulness of the subject being written on. This book is, sadly, no exception.' This self-abnegation continues with a claim of unprecedented modesty that Matthew Silverstone's piece on film-financing is 'the least whingeing' contribution in the book.

Mob-handed and scatter-gun by approach, the authors inevitably hit a lot of targets. Nick Roddick is right on when he states, 'the real crisis in British cinema is not in production but in distribution and exhibition.' What's the point of making cars if they're closing all

JOHN BOORMAN



Power lunches at Langan's. Jonathan Pryce in *The Ploughman's Lunch*.

the roads? Matthew Silverstone gives a very accurate account of how films are financed and rightly chastises British producers for their ineptitude when approaching the City for finance. Martyn Auty has a go at the perennial issue, 'Is it a proper movie if it's made for television?' and actually has something to add.

Steve Jenkins criticises the critics, accusing them of being merely part of the marketing process of the commercial system, that all they offer is a shallow consumers' guide to what happens to be dished up that week. Colin McArthur's reviews in *Tribune* meet with his approval because they put film in a political context, whereas the others, he claims, merely respond out of a set of personal prejudices and predilections. He does not touch upon what I consider to be more significant, which is that critics have almost no influence on popular cinema. The people who go to movies, it seems, don't read newspapers. I sometimes suspect that those who do read them, do so *instead* of seeing films.

Alexander Walker in *National Heroes* surely rebuts Jenkins' complaint that the critics do not consider film in its social and political context. For this is a bold attempt to weave the British films of the 70s and early 80s into the very thread and yarn of our times. His back marker is *Sunday, Bloody Sunday*. We were all intoxicated by the 60s. This movie was about waking up in the 70s with a terrible hangover and discovering that Britain was a shabby, run-down place where people were prepared to accept 'half a loaf'. It is a picture that stands up well, indeed has grown in stature with the years. If Walker had considered the film in psychological

rather than socio-political terms, he might have argued that it was about hetero and homosexual love both losing out to narcissism. Murray Head finally dumps both his dusty suitors, Glenda Jackson and Peter Finch, and goes off to America just in time to join Tom Wolfe's 'Me decade'.

Walker is never less than prescient as he leads us, surefooted, through the boggy terrain of those years and these films. His scholarship is most persuasive, and his accuracy a marvel when you consider that most of the people from whom he gets information lie for a living.

There are so few films that have a significant social or political context that we sometimes sense the strain he experiences in pressing home his thesis. But when he finds a picture like *The Ploughman's Lunch*, where his theory and their subject matter coincide, he is no less than dazzling. 'But if one wishes to understand the snakes-and-ladders feel of Britain in the first years of the 80s, it is to be found in the social scene portrayed by this subversive film, from publishers' parties in Bloomsbury (where hands rape the passing drinks trays, but scarcely a word is uttered about the book of the moment), through the "power lunches" at Langan's Brasserie, the morning confabs in the BBC newsroom which arrange the world's agenda with splendid superciliousness, the cocktail-shaker gossip at the Zanzibar, the "conspicuous waste" of the spacious Barbican Centre betokening the last of the 70s splurge before the Tory cutbacks came, right to the Polytechnics where Atari video-games have been added to the furnishings of the academic mind.'

As Walker begins in the squalor of Glenda Jackson's kitchen, so he ends up picking his way across 'an open-air ramp like a prison catwalk' into Derek Jarman's single-room apartment. 'Prospero's Cell', he calls it. He sees in Jarman's celebration of Punk, High Camp and homosexuality the apotheosis of a Britain lurching into the 80s.

Truth to tell, British Film beggars description, refuses to die, yet hardly exists. Thankfully, good movies defy categorisation. None of these authors can even agree what makes a film British. If it must have British subject matter, out goes *The Killing Fields*. If it must be shot in England, goodbye *Gandhi*. If it must have a British director, farewell *Accident*, *The Servant*, *A Clockwork Orange*, *The Knack*. If it must have 75 per cent British labour, welcome *Star Wars*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Yentl*. If it must be British-financed, exit most remaining contenders except possibly those paid for by Channel 4. But wait, yet another definition would disqualify films financed by television.

To illustrate this anomaly from personal experience, Neil Jordan's *Angel*, which I produced, is considered by Walker as a British film even though it was made in Ireland by an Irish director with an Irish crew and cast, part-financed by the Irish Film Board and dealt with an Irish subject. On the other hand, my film *Excalibur*, shot in Ireland by a British director with a largely British cast and crew and a quintessential British story, is excluded.

Sticking Union Jacks on films is finally a vulgar exercise. A good movie is a testament to the time and place in which it was made and reflects the spirit of the people who made it. Beyond that, the great strength of movies is their ability to cross national frontiers and class barriers. At their best movies are a universal language. They make strangers intimate. They connect people. All we can say of the British film industry is that a lot of talented people are finding ways of making films in this country, and some of those films are very good. It is also a brutal, high risk business with a heavy casualty rate. Some of our best have fallen.

By all means let us nurture the means by which pictures are made. One man who does this more than any other, and whose contribution is largely unacknowledged in these books, is Sir Richard Attenborough. As Chairman of the BFI, Vice-Chairman of Channel 4, Vice-President of BAFTA, and the new Chairman of Goldcrest, he exerts enormous influence, but seems to reject power. He is a tireless conciliator, he turns people away from conflict, helps to get pictures made, and believes as passionately as Alex Walker in the one true and all-embracing British Film Industry. I remain agnostic. ■

The Sennett Screenplays

TOM STEMPEL



Mack Sennett.

Mack Sennett hated scripts. He did not want his directors to use them and he would not allow them on the Keystone lot. The legend, in time, became historical fact. Sixty-odd files, however, in the Sennett Collection at the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, tell a different story. They contain treatments, rehearsal notes and, yes, shooting scripts.

Before examining the files, one should, perhaps, take another look at the sources of information about work on the Keystone lot. Here is the Keystone director Clarence Badger (*Image* magazine, 1957): 'The stories for Keystone Comedies, as constructed by Sennett's writers, never existed on paper. They were simply "fished for", created by

being built up bit by bit, and carried in the writers' heads. The director assigned always took part in the story conferences. It was up to him to memorise the story, the "gags" and situations agreed upon. Incidentally, a session of Keystone writers, in the heat of a "palaver", expressing their ideas with rhapsodical antics, explosive and salty exclamations, was likened to a gathering of badly deranged lunatics.'

Even this comment begins to undermine the notion that Sennett's films were made up on the spur of the moment. (Though some were, specifically those using public events, the most famous being *Kid Auto Races at Venice* in which Chaplin first appeared as the Tramp.) There were stories, Badger says, and they were created by a writing

The studio team, October 1918. Hampton Del Ruth sitting at table, left; Ben Turpin standing, centre; Teddy in foreground.



staff. In 1934, before the legend really gained ground, the screenwriter Gene Fowler devoted a chapter of *Father Goose*, his biography of Sennett, to the Keystone writers and their way of working. In describing the 'palavers', Badger may well have had in mind Fowler's wonderfully vivid accounts of life on Sennett's writing staff. Fowler was also the first writer to mention that Sennett hired court stenographers to take down gag and story details.

In his classic 1949 essay on silent comedy, James Agee summarises Fowler's freewheeling descriptions in his own poetic (if not always accurate) style. He noted: 'During the early years, at least, only the most important scenario might be jotted on the back of an envelope. Mainly Sennett's men thrashed out a few primary ideas and carried them in their heads, sure the better stuff would turn up while they were shooting, in the heat of physical action.' Notice, as many have not, Agee's caution in referring to the 'early years'.

In 1954 came Sennett's own autobiography, *The King of Comedy*, in the form of 'as told to Cameron Shipp'. In some senses it is little more than a rewriting of Fowler, with the third person replaced by the first. It lacks Fowler's vigorous style and omits most of his references to the Keystone writers. Sennett does, however, allow himself this: 'We found out that we could not make our best pictures without solemn and brain-beating preparation. A new theory of motion-picture economics smote us pretty forcefully. It was this: the more money we spent on the script, on writing the story, the less money it cost us to shoot the pictures when we put the actors to work. I thought that over and made motions to get all the work possible out of my writers.'

One of Sennett's writers was the former playwright Hampton Del Ruth. For other companies he had written such serious pictures as Selig's *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Del Ruth was brought into Keystone by the then 'scenario editor' Craig Hutchinson. When Del Ruth explained that he was a writer of dramas and not a gag man, Hutchinson replied, 'Don't worry. What we want is dramatists—men who can write drama tilted a bit. Put the silk hat on cock-eyed.' Del Ruth eventually took over as head of Sennett's story department.

In 1915, Keystone became part of Triangle, and Harry Aitken, Triangle's founder, wanted Keystone to produce a serious picture as Selig's *The Count of pany's* new distribution exchanges busy. Sennett resisted, on the grounds that Keystone had moved up to two-reelers and to do one-reelers would be a regression. But Aitken insisted and in 1916 Sennett set up a unit for which, he told Aitken, he would take no direct responsibility. The head of the unit was Hampton Del Ruth, and it may be because he did not share Sennett's fear of the written script that most of the script material which survives in the Sennett Collection is from the films produced by the Del Ruth unit.



Her Candy Kid.

Each folder in the collection represents a film or project (a few, it seems, were not completed). Some folders contain as many as thirteen items relating to the writing of the film. In that for *Heart Strategy*, for instance, we find: a three-page typed story synopsis; two pages of handwritten notes on character motivation ('The two old men are enemies over an old quarrel over the girl's mother neither got her she married another & left she is now dead this is her daughter'); a typed copy of these notes; a one-page typed synopsis; a two-page typed synopsis with a completely new storyline; another two-page synopsis with more story changes; a four-page typed synopsis which reverts to an earlier version of the story; a working screenplay dated 22 September 1916; a continuity dated 4 October 1916 (this was probably prepared after filming); a two-page typed cutting sheet with instructions on how the chase scene is to be put together; a two-page list of projection-room suggestions, compiled after a viewing of the assembled footage;

Hampton Del Ruth.



a sheet of the titles actually prepared for the film; and a Triangle-Keystone Complete Production Report. The report is a printed form with space for 'scenario by' (in most folders this is followed by 'department'), 'time on story' (three days for *Heart Strategy*) and 'rehearsing' (no time given for *Heart Strategy*).

A common mistake, as many silent film historians warned me, is to confuse a post-production script with a shooting script. In the Sennett Collection, however, many of the items are dated. A first synopsis for *Her Candy Kid*, for instance, is marked 30 December 1916, the rough continuity 2 January 1917 and a smoother continuity/screenplay 3 January 1917. The complete production report shows that the film began shooting on 5 January and finished on 16 January. Likewise, *A Bachelor's Finish* has script materials dated 2 and 5 December 1916, and the report notes that shooting started on 6 December and ended on 20 December.

The papers themselves clearly reveal what is pre- and what is post-production. The pre-production material tends to go from the general to the specific. The synopsis for *A Film Exposure* dated 7 December 1916 notes the 'fad for calisthenics' of the hero's father; by 9 December this has become a specific gag sequence with a set of Indian clubs. The first undated synopsis for *Caught with the Goods* could almost be a straight dramatic story, but by the second synopsis the gags have begun to appear. The post-production synopses, or continuities, tend to be more literary. A scene which is just a fight in a working synopsis becomes 'They get into a Willard-Johnson' in the post-production synopsis, which seems to have been prepared as a press release. What also becomes apparent from the post-production material is how closely the scripts were followed. Not completely—this is comedy, after all—but closely

enough to finish off, once and for all, the idea that Sennett's people did not use scripts.

The Sennett Collection does, however, confirm other aspects of what has been written about work at Keystone. The films for which scripts exist were made between 1916 and 1917, four years after the company was founded; and the accounts of the earliest films (and those earliest films which survive) make it possible to believe that they were done without scripts—they were for the most part simply strings of gags. By the time of the Keystone-Triangle pictures, there is slightly more emphasis on story, or as much as there would ever be in Sennett's films. The synopses, and more crucially the stenographic records that occasionally accompany them, do make a convincing case for the general descriptions of the writing process on the lot. The storylines are constantly changing and often complete sequences of what would appear to be usable gags disappear from one draft to the next.

The stenographic records of the story conferences do not catch the flavour of Badger's gathering of 'badly deranged lunatics': but then the note-takers were, of course, chiefly after the facts. Reading the transcripts, one gets the sense of professionals at work, trying to come up with something, *anything* that will play.

Occasionally the freewheeling nature of the conferences will get them into trouble. In one on what became *Done in Oil*, the story grows more and more complicated until, on page five of the transcript, Del Ruth tells Badger (who is spinning the yarn), 'Simplify it.' Which they did in the next synopsis.

Given Sennett's reputation for making films with nothing but gags, it is intriguing to discover from the collection how much toil went into working out the details of the storyline. The number and variety of synopses indicate the effort expended to make a story work as a story. Hal Roach Sr told the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* in 1984 that the difference between him and Sennett was that 'Sennett stayed with the same kind of gags without stories. I began hiring writers.' Sennett may have stayed with gags, but they were within the context of stories, albeit rather similar ones. In the development of *His Widow's Might*, the first draft synopsis is about a boy working at the beach with some bathing beauties. By the second draft, the heavy has become the traditional bogus Count, and by the third the standard old maid has made an appearance.

The time spent on developing a story was in fact sometimes longer than the production of the film. The first filed story description of *His Fatal Move* is

dated 18 January 1917, and the story was not completed until shooting began on 3 May. The first synopsis of what became *A Dark Room Secret* was done on 11 November 1916, the next on 24 May 1917, and two more followed on 30 May, with yet another on the following day. On *Her Candy Kid*, the total story time listed on the production report was sixteen days, while the shooting took only eleven.

Perhaps the biggest surprise is the time that was spent on rehearsal. *Black Eyes and Blue* began with two synopses, the first one-and-a-half pages dated 27 October 1916, the second six pages dated the next day. These are followed by notes from a rehearsal (2 November) in which the storyline has been simplified and the action begins more rapidly. Then comes an undated six-page synopsis that appears to be pre-production and a continuity (21 November) that has the literary marks of a post-production document. *A Clever Dummy* was intended as a one-reeler, but it appears that, after a rehearsal in May 1917, it grew into a two-reeler. Time spent on the story was five days, on rehearsal two, and there was also a ten-day break in shooting. On *His One Night Stand*, the story occupied three days and rehearsals nine, during which, according to the rehearsal continuities, the storyline changed considerably.

All this is not to suggest that the use of written screenplay materials at Keystone was either formal or absolute. The synopses and scripts in the Sennett Collection are very informal; they lack the detail, for instance, of the surviving scripts of Sennett's partner at Triangle, Thomas Ince. On any given Keystone-Triangle picture there may be several synopses, or only one or two. There may be several drafts of the shooting script, or simply a synopsis. Frequent pencil notes on the scripts, synopses and rehearsal continuities suggest that, contrary to Badger's assertion, directors did handle written material. In defence of the legend, it should be said that the post-production continuities do occasionally reveal discrepancies between the scripts and the films themselves; and, furthermore, that the scripts in the collection are of films which Sennett did not personally supervise, though they were made at his studio.

Mack Sennett used writers to create his films. He not only used them, he valued them, although not necessarily for their literary skills. Gene Fowler quotes Sennett as saying: 'I don't want *what* they write. I want the brains that are behind their writing.' There is evidence, in fact, that he valued writers more than he did actors or even directors. Fowler tells of two similar incidents in which Hampton Del Ruth wanted to direct and Raymond Griffith wanted to act, and Sennett turned them down because he needed them as writers. In his autobiography, Frank Capra describes the occasion he asked Sennett to let him direct. 'A director?' Sennett expostulated. 'And lose a good gag man? You're nuts.'

Ben Turpin in *A Clever Dummy*.



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A Zed & Two Noughts: Frances Barber and Deacon twin.

A white horse with black stripes

A Zed & Two Noughts/Gavin Millar

'Cinema is far too rich and capable a medium to be merely left to the storytellers,' avers Peter Greenaway in a 'statement' about his new film. The implication in the challenge is that something richer and more capable than a mere story lies in wait for us. It is a bold gesture, and devotees of *The Draughtsman's Contract* will certainly recognise the style, the concerns and the language of *A Zed & Two Noughts* (Artificial Eye): the richness might take a little more finding.

There is, nevertheless, a sort of story, with characters, of a sort. Two, possibly formerly Siamese twin, brothers, Oswald and Oliver, lose their wives in a car crash. The surviving driver, Alba Bewick, loses her leg, but is sustained, during her convalescence, by a love affair with both brothers. The brothers, zoo employees, are driven by grief to speculate on meaning in life, a subject they pursue by investigating animal decay and captivity, the vagaries of chance and natural selection, the mystery of symmetry. A surgeon, Van Meegeren, encourages Alba to allow him to amputate the odd leg. The brothers develop a plan to free all animals in captivity. Alba declares herself pregnant by both brothers, gives birth to twins and dies, though not before meeting at last her legless dream-lover, Arc-en-Ciel, whom she appoints the babies' father. The brothers Oswald and Oliver, distracted once more by loss, set up a final experiment to photograph them-

selves in a, literally, joint suicide. According to the synopsis, they fail.

Needless to say, this gives one very little idea of what the film is like, except to indicate a type of not so much free-range as battery surrealism, in which as many little ideas as possible are crammed together in an impossible space, force-fed into artificial growth and strangled before they see the light of day. It would be unfair to Greenaway not to point to the substance in the film which resists narrative synopsis, as viz: the homage to Vermeer, whose work influences the composition, lighting, dressing and even subject-matter of most scenes; the play of black and white against colour and the attempt to give them moral, or sometimes immoral, weight, e.g. in the persons of Venus de Milo, a sort of carnivorous whore, and Van Hoyten, a sinister superior, both in black, or Van Meegeren's assistant Caterina Bolnes (Vermeer's Lady in Red), in red, naturally, except for a flash of black and white knickers with which she seeks to distract the brothers from Alba (forever herself, of course, in white...); the constant time-lapse photography of animal and vegetable decay (prawns, crocodile, the swan which flew through the car windscreen, a bitten apple) accompanied by the counterpoint of David Attenborough's television series celebrating the natural world; and so on; and really on. There seems to be no limit to the itemisation of accident, chance, coincidence, cor-

respondence in which Greenaway delights and the engineering of which constitutes *A Zed & Two Noughts'* principal process.

More questionable is where the process leads, for the items accumulate without conclusion so that there seems no reason for the film to end anywhere in particular while there are still connections waiting to be made. It is the collector's dream, and his nightmare, that while he pursues the ultimate classification, he dreads the business ending: the last of the flora and fauna, the last bus number, the last matchbox. Greenaway confesses that he is 'playing with taxonomies' and one wonders on which area of the graph his work will settle. If, as he insists, the film is set in motion by the 'trauma of loss', is this a serious concern or merely an excuse for playing? Is the impression of coldness a silly mistake on our part—to have expected something we are not being offered?

His visual and verbal processes rely mostly on the pun, not notably a vehicle associated much with feeling. But the pun, in the hands of a serious surrealist, can at least be illuminating. It is arguable that the conceits of *The Draughtsman's Contract*, as preposterous but less visceral than these, were illuminating about painting, about light, about our prurient curiosity, about our feeble powers of observation, about our sloppy reasoning—but they were playful illuminations, delicately constructed and wittily made. We were had, but genially.

What is worrying about *A Zed & Two Noughts* is that it seems to be taking itself seriously at times: is it *really* about the horror of accident and loss, the foulness of meaninglessness at the end of so much complex and refined purposefulness? ('Why should we come all this way so painfully inch by inch?' someone asks.) The brothers 'can't stand the idea of a lady rotting for nothing—or is it for some reason?' Well, is it? The prawns 'are on their way back to where they came from.' It's a partial answer, to indicate that the lady is too, and so indeed are we all. But the flipness creeps on apace and Greenaway doesn't seem to want to stop it. First there is playing with categories. How does life begin? ask the brothers, perplexed. And how does it end? 'With a white swan,' comes the lugubriously comic reply, failing to answer the question or make us smile much. The flipness turns eventually into facetiousness. Alba, contemplating another amputation, feels sorry for the remaining leg: 'they were made for each other.' Encountering the long-sought Arc-en-Ciel, she is told that 'he has taken his legs off to meet you on an equal footing.'

Greenaway is certainly a talented painter with a penchant for crossword puzzles. He is using the cinema not to tell stories but to ask questions. If we have to give up the pleasure of stories,

characters, emotions, let us make sure the questions are interesting enough. 'If the evolutionary span of life on Earth is represented by a year of 365 days, and man made his appearance at eight o'clock on the 31st of December, did woman arrive just after eight?' asks Greenaway, as an instance of those

questions that the cinema's rich capability might address itself to. Or again, 'Was Adam a twin, and if so, what happened to his brother? Is a zebra a white horse with black stripes, or a black horse with white stripes?' Some may feel that those are questions best left not so much unanswered as unasked. □

Broadway's longest runner

A Chorus Line/Robert Cushman

How do you film a stagebound musical? The question is nearly as old as the movies themselves but *A Chorus Line* raises it in an especially acute form. Here is a show that, in New York at any rate, is not just a hit but a legend. The longest running musical in Broadway history, it is, and deserves to be, part of the fabric of the city. It is not the greatest musical ever, but it is the greatest tribute ever paid to the people who make the musical. In a town fixated on show business, *A Chorus Line* rates as an icon.

It is, as everybody must know, about auditions. There are eight chorus roles to be assigned in a Broadway show, and we witness the final countdown. Zach, the director-choreographer, has twice as many on his short list as he can use. The show *A Chorus Line* is stagebound in a very special sense. It is not a backstage musical; it is an onstage musical. The candidates audition on the stage; Zach watches them and harangues them from (as far as we can tell) the back of the auditorium. The audience is caught between them, eavesdropping; perhaps the greatest thrill of the evening is the element of *vérité*. The opening number,

with the cast being put collectively through their paces, under whiplash instruction from the assistant choreographer, persuades you that this is what an audition is actually like.

That number is there in Richard Attenborough's film too, but with only a fraction of the impact. It doesn't, as in the show, come at us out of nowhere. The film (Rank) begins with a long, moody aerial tour of Manhattan: handsome of course, seeming to owe something to the beginning of the *West Side Story* film, and something perhaps to the Tony Awards show the year that *Chorus Line* swept the board. But unlike its predecessors, this opening conveys no sense of expectation. It feels explanatory; this is New York, this is where these characters come from, this is the theatre. We are taken on a tour of last year's Broadway marquees, avoiding the Shubert where *A Chorus Line* is actually playing; we have to avoid it, of course, but it feels somehow like cheating. How can this be the real Broadway, if it's deprived of its major exhibit? But it isn't its own fictional world, either. It is a compromise, and so goes the rest of the picture.

Much of it faithfully follows the stage original. Zach, on the pretext that the chorus roles have to be acted as well as sung and danced, interrogates his candidates. What kind of people are they? How were their childhoods, their adolescences? (This seems to translate into, How uncomfortable was their discovery of sex?) Why did they get into dancing? In most cases the answer to that one is, as compensation. They are all pretty screwed-up, though no more so than most of us. So we identify with them, and sympathise with their experience of being on trial for a desperately needed break. We make an emotional investment in every one of them (we are told nothing about the parts they are trying out for, so can have no preferences on the grounds of suitability—cunning move, that) and when the final selections and rejections are made we are guaranteed fifty per cent heartbreak and fifty per cent exhilaration. With so potent a mixture the show's success is hardly surprising.

The movie, though, lets us off the hook. There is no interval in the stage show; we, like the performers, are trapped in the shell of that stage and auditorium. There is no break in the film, either; but there is change of scene. It is minor—we wander no further than the greenroom and the sidewalk outside the theatre—but fatal. One of the applicants stands apart from the others: Cassie, an ex-almost-star and the director's former lover. She now comes to him desperate for a fresh start in the chorus. He refuses; he says it's because she's too good, but he may just think she's too old. On stage the story of her past life was compressed into some embarrassingly overwrought exchanges; in the screenplay these have been ironed

A Chorus Line: Alyson Reed (third from right).



out, and she herself (affectingly played by Alyson Reed) more fully realised. But that turns out to be the greater evil. She becomes the central character (old Hollywood logic, perhaps, to give us a protagonist to identify with) and the collective strength of the material vanishes. The other auditionees become shadowy (not one has the immediacy I remember from stage companies in New York, London and Toronto) and Zach, a highly visible presence instead of a disembodied goading voice, is transformed from ambiguous father-confessor to unadulterated bullying bastard. Actually, the star part in the picture is Larry (Terence Mann), the assistant who carries messages from Zach to Cassie and back again. His is a basic narrative function, and Attenborough seems happier with it, and with Larry's flip, kindly embarrassment at going between, than he does with musical numbers.

Zach won't let Cassie on the stage so she wanders around the theatre. We wander with her, and in doing so plunge

into a routine kind of realism. There is in fact a horrible clash of conventions. Even in the stage show there was a hiccup when the characters switched from singing and dancing as they believably might at an audition to singing and dancing as in a conventional musical: i.e., as a heightened substitute for conversation. The sheer assurance of Michael Bennett's staging overrode the problem, but here you don't know where you are. Zach interrogates his first victim: ordinary conversation. Victim replies with an autobiographical song-and-prance called 'I Can Do That': stylisation but treated as if nobody knew the difference, prosaically and head-on. Then cut away to Cassie, pursuing her destiny; back to naturalism. Then we are onstage again, the number is still in progress, and another auditionee, who has no narrative connection with it, is joining in. Why? Sheer *joie de vivre*? We would have to get pretty high to believe that; and nothing in the shooting of the numbers does that for us. Considering that the company spend all

their time either dancing or talking about dancing, it is extraordinary how little sense of dance you carry away from it.

A *Chorus Line* might have been filmed entirely in its stage setting: at worst we would have had a record of the original, at best a picture that created tension from confinement. Or it could have been thoroughly restructured: perhaps letting us see the characters growing up in their home towns before bringing them together to be judged. I have no idea how, or even whether, either approach could have worked out, but it is significant that Bennett himself, who reportedly had first option on directing the film, passed it up. Perhaps he thought there was no way of making it work. The most effective things in Attenborough's film come straight from the original: the vestigial strength of the central conceit, and the occasional telling detail ('Watch Larry,' says Zach condescendingly, 'he's got the right style—very 30s') that persuades you this is how the Broadway cattle-market really is. □

Reds and black

Letter to Brezhnev and *No Surrender*/David Wilson

There has always been a certain otherness about Liverpool. Natives of the city will tell you, good-humouredly but insistently, that they are different from other people. This is not just the North-South divide, since people who live two miles outside the city boundaries tend to be regarded as foreigners with funny accents. The city council is even now fighting a militant battle for the right of Liverpool to be different, even if it means bankrupting the place—which will be one more thing, along with a waterfront skyline, a melting-pot population and a quirkily belligerent sense of humour, that Liverpool has in common with New York. Beleaguered on all sides, Liverpool is still a place with spirit. And now, since it has two of everything from cathedrals to football teams, it has two films which try, in very different ways, to reflect something of the spirit of the place.

The first is the wholly indigenous *Letter to Brezhnev* (Palace Pictures), directed by Chris Bernard and written by Frank Clarke, both of whom have contributed episodes to the Liverpool-based tv soap opera, *Brookside*. For its enterprise, the story of how the film got made would win approval from Liverpool's worst enemies, the present government. The script had to be put on, adapted, in a local theatre before anyone would risk money on its prospects as a film; and started shooting on a sum rather less than it costs to buy a small house in the city. In the end, with backing from Manx capital, Palace Pictures and Channel 4 (though not from

the local metropolitan council, who deemed it obscene and probably thought it unflattering), the film came in at under £½ million. It was shot in less than a month, and launched in Kirkby, a sprawling wasteland of jerry-built housing and industrial estate which is a legacy of the city's over-urgent postwar

Letter to Brezhnev:
Alexandra Pigg and Peter Firth.



slum clearance programme, and where some of the filming was done.

Like Liverpool's football, *Letter to Brezhnev* is simple and direct. A Russian ship docks on the Mersey, and two sailors go on the town, in search of a couple of Liver birds more animated than the ones they recognise on the city's skyline. Their night on the town, meanwhile, is also having a night on the town. Elaine (Alexandra Pigg), who is unemployed, and Teresa (Margi Clarke, the scriptwriter's sister), who stuffs chickens on a greasy Kirkby production line, high-heel round the clubs spurring dole money, pay packet and a wallet lifted from a hopeful drunk who is trussed and plucked as expertly as one of Teresa's chickens. Boys meet girls (or rather, girls hijack boys: the film has a punchy line in role-reversal) and, after some ice-breaking exchanges about the Russian weather, night follows day. In a hotel, while the pugnacious platinum blonde Teresa noisily cements her Anglo-Soviet relationship (her Sergei—Alfred Molina—speaks no English), the more romantic Elaine spends the night star-gazing with the no less romantic Peter (Peter Firth, who speaks English with a shaky Russian accent).

So far, and despite some uncertainties of tone and pace, the film gets by on its dialogue. Liverpool has bred a legion of comics (as the local joke has it: 'You have to be a comedian to live here'), and there is no lack here of the kind of quick-witted riposte which characterises the city's idiosyncratic humour. Peter: 'In the Soviet Union, if you don't work you don't eat'—Elaine: 'It's a bit like that here, too.' Talk, it seems, works better on Russians than action. After a quick tour of the city sights—cathedral, ferry across the Mersey, the ugly blot of the

city centre shopping precinct—Elaine has fallen for Peter's star, a painted twinkle which overworks its charm, and resolved to follow him home to Russia. Hence a letter to Brezhnev—the last Soviet President she can recall—brief domestic curiosity, family and Foreign Office opposition, and a final flight to Moscow (courtesy of British Airways, but on this budget you fly the flag).

It is in this resolution that the film begins seriously to falter. Where the first half, for all the starry sentiment, is just carried by the resolutely down-to-earth (and earthy) dialogue, when Elaine goes after her man the script has trouble following her. This seems less a lack of money than a lack of direction. A dream love scene on the Russian ship proclaims its parody, but seems all the same to have strayed in out of some ill-judged nod to Gene Kelly: *On the Town* with a Scouse accent. Scenes in the Kremlin ('Take a letter, Miss Jones'), with a lone media hawk and with an oily Foreign Office man belong in three different films. Elaine's home life, with its self-applauding line in inventive abuse and the camera trying to avoid the furniture, looks like a home movie.

Letter to Brezhnev is rather like the city that made it. It has enterprise, vitality, resilience. Its jokes can bite, not least at the heels of politicians. But it is also too anxious to please, and too concerned to stress the difference of this city and its people. In the end, like the star-struck Kirkby girl (and the city's political leaders), it fails to make the choice between realism and romance.

Reports from the home front suggest that Liverpool people themselves had mixed feelings about *Letter to Brezhnev*. I suspect that they will be somewhat less than enchanted by a second, darker portrait of the city. *No Surrender* (Palace Pictures) has a promising pedigree. Scripted by Alan Bleasdale, whose tv series *Boys from the Blackstuff* made a nation look hard at Liverpool; directed by Peter Smith, who made an immensely sympathetic debut in 1974 with *A Private Enterprise* and has since done good work for television; and produced by Mamoun Hassan, making his first film since the chopping down of the National Film Finance Corporation. Sad to report, this promise is not matched by the film, which emerges like some graffiti-sprayed canvas from 'Bedlam'.

We are here in Irish Liverpool, at a social club somewhere in one of the city's more desolate inner suburbs. This place, with its gaudy decor and its cavernous interior, looks like a scene out of hell, and it provides the setting for a bizarre battle of wills between two kinds of demon: the Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants who, even in this home across the water, will not let the old fight end. Before battle commences, a realist opening has a grizzled old Ulster terrorist (Mark Mulholland) persuading



No Surrender: Ray McNally (left) and Mark Mulholland.

an old comrade-in-arms, Billy (Ray McNally), to give him shelter. Meanwhile, in another place and on another plane, a new manager (Michael Angelis) arrives at the social club and persuades the edgily unfriendly bouncer (Bernard Hill) to admit him. In a dark alley, somewhere or other, two youths mug a blind man, who beats them off. Elsewhere again, armed police noisily break in on an old couple in fancy dress.

Trying hard to hang on to a thread to guide us through this labyrinth of scenes, we eventually find ourselves inside the club, where the rest of the film takes place. Up to this point, *No Surrender* has lurched from comedy through black-fringed farce to sinister realism. And so it goes. Changes of mood, which are frequent and abrupt, are matched by changes in style, from flat naturalism to lowering expressionism. The actors, and there are many good ones in a very large cast (several of them from *Boys from the Blackstuff*), look bemused, required as they are to play straight in one scene and against the grain in the next. The result is that lines go dead, awkward pauses open up waiting for something to fill them, characters are left stranded as a scene changes key.

Events in passing. In a back room, a man sits strapped to a chair which stands in a pool of blood. He is being tortured. It emerges, hazily, that this is the previous manager of the club, whose parting two-fingered gesture for this New Year's Eve has been to book into the premises two groups of pensioners—one Catholic, one Protestant, both Irish—and a variety of dud acts. The new manager looks on shell-shocked as the pensioners, the Catholics in fancy dress, glare ancient hatreds across the hall.

The old Ulster gunman, meanwhile, is secreted somewhere in the bowels of the club. In the chaos of the arena a blind boxer, with some old score to settle, staggers round in an emerald-green dressing gown punching the air. A rock group ends its dire performance with a fight on stage, and is pelted with food from the floor. A magician on the edge of breakdown pulls a dead rabbit from under his top hat. A gay comic minces by. One of the pensioners apparently suffers a heart attack, is wheeled into the night, and disappears. An Orange Lodge band passes through, prompting a rival rendition from the outraged Catholics. The manager calls the police. Enter, stage-centre, a group of mentally deranged geriatrics, who take uncertain station between the warring factions.

We have now passed from Bedlam to Bosch. But are we to laugh at this mad crowd, or pity them, or simply watch them eat and fight? The scene is grotesque; but it cannot be, as the film seems to want it to be, funny and pathetic at the same time. Lunatics, certified or not, are not a laughing matter. In this dark mayhem, an idea flickers dimly. The mad people are a chorus of comment on the farce of an internecine conflict with its roots in religious bigotry. But a farce with real blood, in the real world, leaving death and destruction in its wake. Here, in the film's world, a romantic resolution is tentatively offered. The manager walks off into the dawn with the kitchen girl (Joanna Whalley) who wants to be a singer. Ulster Billy, having strangled his old crazed comrade, returns to the deserted battlefield and telephones his Catholic son-in-law with a stuttered plea for reconciliation. The fight is over, and

a New Year dawns. But on what, outside the club and over the water?

No Surrender seems at odd moments like a pitch-black reworking of Milos Forman's *The Firemen's Ball*. But somewhere between the idea and its realisation, or perhaps between two distinct notions of what the film is about, something seems to have gone terribly wrong.

There were moments in *Blackstuff* when Alan Bleasdale seemed to want not simply to go for the jugular but to twist the knife until the blood spurted. In this film, the bleeding will not stop, and we are invited to laugh even as we grimace. It is a messy spectacle. And life, even in Liverpool, is not just a black surrealist joke. □



Year of the Dragon: Fabia Drake (left) and Mickey Rourke.

After the deluge

Year of the Dragon/John Pym

Stanley White, the hero of Michael Cimino's new film, is an honest Brooklyn cop. He is cast in a similar mould to James Averill, the immigrants' sheriff in *Heaven's Gate*, and Michael Vronsky, the good soldier of *The Deer Hunter*. All three have a sense of history, they lead from the front and have the embattled American ideal at heart: around them everything seems to be breaking up, or in Averill's case seemed to be falling apart even before it had formed. But what distinguishes Stanley from the other two, who were, in their different ways, rectitude and calm personified, is his unrelenting, twisted-up anger.

Captain White is the most action-decorated officer in the NYPD, he's not above boasting. (Cimino has a taste for these near-supermen, and before *Heaven's Gate* he planned a remake of *The Fountainhead*.) He is a Vietnam veteran, uncompromising, bullish and uncouth; though when the shell cracks, after his wife has thrown him out, he cannot hold back the tears of self-pity. He's a Polish American with antagonistic, pragmatic Irish American superiors. He is up against the system, that old system, which on both sides of the law these days is all for a quiet life. Corruption cannot be rooted out, but

it can be controlled (if everyone is discreet), channelled away from the tourists.

This, we must imagine, is still that unhappy limbo time of a few years back: the Washington monument honouring the Americans who fell in Vietnam has not yet been unveiled; men like Captain White, rightly or wrongly, have not been transmogrified into national heroes. Stanley, however, will not lie down. He will not—with his crooked grin, his ostentatiously pulled down felt hat, his patriotic tie-pin and his hair gone prematurely grey—surrender at home what he believes he fought for, and lost, abroad. From our first glimpse of him, coat swinging, striding purposefully away from the camera amid the harmless popping fireworks of a Chinatown parade, we know that he does not need a breastplate to make him invulnerable. In many, if not all, surface aspects, Stanley White is a disagreeable piece of work: but he's the story's hero and we are asked to sympathise with him.

Year of the Dragon (Columbia-EMI-Warner), it's no secret, is Michael Cimino's comeback after the epic catastrophe of *Heaven's Gate*. His producer this time out, however, is the tested Dino De Laurentiis; and his

apparent purpose, aided by a pragmatic co-writer, Oliver Stone (*Midnight Express* and the recent *Scarface*), has been, simply, the free but businesslike adaptation of a routinely businesslike drug-busting novel by Robert Daley. Here is proof, the movie seems to say, that a wayward film-maker can deliver a certain sort of package. Looked at in one light, the film is an artful display of goods.

Cimino is not after 'the poetry of America'. Mott Street has, to be sure, been built in a studio in North Carolina, with that exactitude which is one of the director's trademarks, but the scale is not that of the infamous reconstruction of Casper, Wyoming, in the fastness of Montana. A looming, resplendent feature of *The Deer Hunter* was the onion-domed church in the Pennsylvania steel town; the Church plays a role in the new film, but this time Cimino is not tempted to linger on the architecture—violent action is what chiefly occupies him, the first item on the bill of goods. He twice pulls out the stops, in a multi-levelled restaurant shoot-out and in a chase involving two teenage hitwomen with cockatoo hairdoes, and the desired effect is achieved: for action sequences, he has few equals.

This said, however, *Year of the Dragon* is a Michael Cimino film, picking up, though in a different register and on a different scale, a theme which first appeared in *The Deer Hunter*, that of the honest immigrant's broken dream. Stanley White—Mickey Rourke, briefly seen as Nate Champion's companion Nick Ray in *Heaven's Gate*, a more literal discourse on this theme—emerges as a spiritual cousin of Michael Vronsky. This, though crudely, is what could have become of Michael fifteen years on. At the end of *Year of the Dragon*, Stanley hands a pistol to his mortally wounded quarry, the heroin baron Joey Tai (John Lone), and allows him to put an end to his misery with a bullet through his brain. Joey, who started life in the slums of Kowloon, was in Stanley's eyes particularly detestable: an immigrant who had betrayed America's symbolic hand of friendship.

Economics aside (though one cannot, of course, leave economics aside), Michael Cimino's proven strength is his ability to orchestrate big scenes, to balance the most intimate of wide-screen moments with shots of grandiose spectacle. In *Year of the Dragon*, he has, it appears, one hand tied behind his back. He tries for the big opposition, the telling cut, to contrast, for example, barbarism and civilisation: Joey strikes a dangerous heroin deal in a montagnard encampment in Thailand and makes a decisive point by producing the severed head of a rival; on the other side of the world, Stanley attends the portentous funeral (decidedly small beer when compared to the wedding scene in *The Deer Hunter*) of his wife, whose

throat has been slit, with shocking abruptness, by one of Joey's soldiers. Severed heads in the movies always look phoney, and this, regrettably, is no heart-stopping juxtaposition.

Try as Cimino may, the trouble is that Stanley White is in the end a deeply unsympathetic character, despite Mickey Rourke's considerable screen presence. One doesn't care about his self-satisfied obsessiveness. It becomes tediously overstated. He goes bursting into Chinatown, with its emblematic, unrealistic villains and its one emblematic good guy (an unsentimental fellow who has spent forty years in a subterranean curd factory and whose predicament parallels Stanley's), like the 86th Airborne Cavalry. One sides with his wife (Caroline Cava), a nurse whom he loves, but not enough and not when it matters and to whom he won't give a child. Their scenes together are the best in the movie, having something of the poignance and truth of those between Robert De Niro and Meryl Streep in *The Deer Hunter*. But one understands why she was driven to throw him out. Her death, which should have been the hyper-emotional turning

point of the film, is skewered by the conventional pyrotechnics which follow: again, cranking the plot is the order of the day.

Stanley treats the TV reporter Tracy Tzu (the model Ariane), whom he co-opts to his crusade, and whose swank apartment he at one point takes over as his headquarters, with an at times inexcusable brutishness, albeit she's a tough media person who can, up to a point, look after herself. Although Stanley White's nastiness is of course partly protective colouring, it finally leaves a more bitter taste in the mouth than the film's paper-thin characterisation of the inhabitants of Chinatown. (The old cry of racism has again been levelled at Cimino in the United States: a cry as silly as it is literal-minded; and Tracy Tzu, in any event, speaks up for the honest immigrant.) The question one leaves the cinema asking is: Why is Stanley White so angry? Like the director of *Heaven's Gate*, he has weathered many vicissitudes: at the fade he is picked from the gutter, in corny slow motion, by the faithful, abused Tracy. He has won through, shown the world. □

more than education and the principles for which Omar's sodden father still shakily stands. Another major credit of the film is that in its chaos of incidents and relationships, the characters are so defined and moral problems (but not easy solutions to them) are laid out with such clarity.

When *My Beautiful Laundrette* made its startling appearance at the Edinburgh Film Festival, Kureishi's script tended to get most of the credit, with Stephen Frears' role written off as a modestly efficient job of TV film direction. But scripts don't direct themselves—certainly not to look this good for £600,000. It needs Frears' poker-face comedy to take a scene like the opening of the Powders Laundrette—outside the NF boys glower at the impatient crowd waiting to get into the flash new establishment, while inside the Pakistani godfather waltzes among the spin driers with his mistress, to the romantic strains of the muzak, unaware that in the back room Omar and Johnny are occupied in a passionate love scene—and make it all fall naturally into place. (The suspense in anticipation of the inevitable dramatic discovery of this scene is comically undercut when Nasser credulously accepts Omar's explanation that the lads were just having a lie-down after all the exertions.)

Nor can script alone, whatever the opportunities it offers, entirely account for performances so effective. Saeed Jaffrey's ebullience is cunningly moulded to the ingratiating knave Nasser; and Shirley Ann Field is graceful and comic as his mistress, with a wonderfully touching moment when she encounters Nasser's daughter and attempts to explain her role to the brash, unbending girl. The cultural confusions are subtly underlined by the choice of accents—the Pakistani lilt of the immigrants contrasted with the uncompromising South London of Omar and his cousin (Rita Wolff).

Hanif Kureishi says that all his plays are about boys in love and that in this case, the boys 'are really the two sides of me . . . because I'm half Pakistani and half English. I got the two parts of myself together . . . kissing.' Again Stephen Frears must take major credit for the handling of the love story, which is unemphatic, guileless, easy, touching and unashamedly erotic—not something superimposed, but an integral factor in the complex world the young men inhabit. In the final scene that world is falling apart: their laundrette has been wrecked and Selim beaten up by the NF yobs; poor Nasser has lost his mistress and his wife has turned with disconcerting efficiency to witchcraft; the economy is not looking good either. There is only sentiment left. The boys have still each other. Kureishi and Frears, without self-consciousness or shame, leave us with one of the most delicate and touching love scenes in contemporary cinema. □

Only sentiment

My Beautiful Laundrette/David Robinson

'At the moment,' Hanif Kureishi has said (in an interview by Jane Root in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*), 'everything is so horrific that if you wrote straight social realism people wouldn't be able to watch it.' Instead he wrote *My Beautiful Laundrette* (Mainline), which you can watch. The marvel of the film is that it deals with such tough issues—class, race, sex, corruption, ignorance, prejudice, Britain here and now—yet remains not only watchable but very comic; that it never compromises, yet proposes no ready-made villains or victims, unless (fulfilling both functions) it is the hopeless little knot of National Front punks who hang dismally around waiting for something or someone to smash.

Omar (Gordon Warnecke) is a nice bright Pakistani youth who looks after his father, a one-time left-wing journalist, now bedridden, mostly by gin and disillusion, in their shabby flat overlooking the railway. With enough ideals left to see education as his son's salvation, the father wants to send Omar to college, but meanwhile gets him a job in his brother's garage. Uncle Nasser is poles apart from his brother: a declared and cheerful exponent of the Thatcherite enterprise philosophy, already a millionaire from rackets, Rachmanism and a variety of shifty enterprises handled by a vague gangsterish relative, Selim.

Nasser takes his smart nephew, and puts him in charge of a disintegrating

laundrette (the spelling preferred by the film). To help him (he has already understood the principles of employing labour), Omar takes on Johnny (Daniel Day-Lewis), an old schoolmate who has passed through the NF experience and now wants to go straight. A love affair starts, or revives, between them. Johnny unexpectedly proves the stronger morally, less readily convinced of Omar's newly learned lessons, that money and the power it brings count for

Gordon Warnecke (left),
Shirley Ann Field, Saeed Jaffrey.



'The least modern ...'

FINALLY TRUFFAUT

by Don Allen

Secker & Warburg/£10.95

Truffaut is portrayed by Don Allen as a film Fogey, affecting a 'lack of interest in general theories or philosophical arguments' as others might sport an elderly tweed jacket, describing himself as 'the least modern and the least intellectual of all the New Wave directors' and as 'never wanting to revolutionise the French cinema, merely to return to the "good" traditions of the 30s represented by Vigo and particularly Renoir.' Such a seemingly incorrigible *passéiste* would hardly have commanded a second's attention. But Truffaut's deprecatory self-characterisation owes more to the autodidact's caution than to systematic anti-intellectualism, while his career was much more rich and varied than the stated modesty of his aspirations might lead one to suppose.

Two facts that are rarely

emphasised about the New Wave are crucial to appreciating Truffaut's career. The first is that the New Wave was a producers' even more than a directors' revolution. The second is that whatever the New Wave directors' apparent predilection for B-feature material, and Truffaut himself adapted a number of thrillers for the screen, they were strongly committed to classicism in film-making and hoped for the cultural significance that Hollywood cinema had acquired in America. That they did not instantly achieve it was due to inexperience and lack of resources but not to any lack of ambition. Essentially, what lay behind the *politique des auteurs* was the intuition that American film-makers exercised freedom within a system whose rules were accepted and understood by all (in the same way as the rules of prosody or dramaturgy), and which was ultimately supportive. The only sense in which belief in such a system might have been considered revolutionary was that comparable structures did not and do not exist in France, but it is a misconception of Truffaut's career (as of Godard's) to imagine that his aim was to form some kind of avant-garde.

Truffaut's film criticism in the

1950s was penetrating, witty, incisive and iconoclastic. His marriage in 1957 to the daughter of one of France's most influential film distributors gave him the financial resources to make his first film and an entrée into the film world. Thereafter, through his company Les Films du Carosse, he consistently supported interesting and difficult projects by Godard, Rivette, Cocteau, Pialat and others. He acted in his own films and in those of others, and his writing on the cinema, particularly in the 1970s, became extensive. Truffaut was quite clearly an extraordinarily brilliant man, but little of his brilliance, regrettably, emerges from Don Allen's book.

Finally Truffaut is a revised edition of the *François Truffaut* in the 'Cinema One' series and, as such, is perhaps saddled with the inappropriate format of one chapter per film, except for the Antoine Doinel cycle which is discussed as a unity. The author therefore has little opportunity to be selective or to pursue thematic links fully, and no space to devote to aspects of Truffaut's career, such as his activities as writer and producer, which are less well known but arguably more influential than his films. Most viewers would agree that *Les 400 Coups* is a masterpiece but that the Doinel films become more embarrassing as they proceed, as do Truffaut's uneasy tributes to his lovers in *La Sirène du Mississippi* and *La Femme d'à Côté*. Equally, his forays into showbiz are neither slick enough nor schmaltzy enough even to compete with Lelouch, never mind the Americans. But many of the films which do not have a contemporary setting—*Adèle H.*, *Les Deux Anglaises*, *La Chambre Verte*, *L'Enfant Sauvage*, *Jules et Jim*—have a depth of feeling and understanding that render them remarkable.

To judge from *Les 400 Coups*, in which the only moment that the family appears remotely united or even lighthearted is when they emerge from the cinema, one can surmise that films procured a happiness for Truffaut that simply wasn't available elsewhere. The cinema becomes a place where deep passions can be articulated provided they are distanced in some way. The received view is that the comedies achieve this best; yet Truffaut is a much underrated tragic film-maker, and it would have been interesting to read Don Allen at greater length on this aspect of his subject's work.

Finally Truffaut is an indispensable guide to Truffaut's films, partly for the elegance and economy of its plot summaries, partly because Don Allen is lucid

about Truffaut's inability to age as gracefully as the great Hollywood *auteurs* were able to do. It is also the only work in English so far to bring Truffaut's career up to date and to a close. But perhaps its major virtue is to demonstrate the case for a more investigative study of a figure who, by the end of his life, had been written off by discriminating filmgoers as incapable of being surprising, but who was in reality one of the most significant figures in postwar French cinema.

JILL FORBES

Poles apart

THE STORY OF THE LOST REFLECTION

The Alienation of the Image in Western and Polish Cinema

by Paul Coates

Verso/New Left Books

£20 (hardcover), £6.95 (paper)

Western and Polish cinema? It seems at first sight a curious combination: one wonders how any general statement about 'western' alienation might fit into the idiosyncratic conditions of Poland—and *vice versa*. Is the book mainly about Poland, or mainly about the West? The emphasis, in terms of page numbers, turns out to be the latter; and people picking it up believing that it contains a specialist account of Polish film conditions ought to be warned at the outset.

In fact, the range of cultural reference in this book is as wide as one remembers coming across. Paul Coates is one of those writers who appears to have read everything, and seen everything. His book—short, though extremely ambitious—is divided into four sections. The first is a difficult meditation on cinema's fittingness to assume the role of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or 'total work of art', in the manner prescribed by Wagner for nineteenth century opera. Can cinema, in other words, take over the mantle of opera, as a synthesis of all the other arts? (The answer appears to be no—with regret.) The next section is entitled 'Fragments of a Theory of Film', but the word 'fragments' is modest and honorific, since in the course of this section Coates delivers his views on everything that can be relevantly thought of: sound, colour, dubbing, subtitling, genre, narrative, star system, etc. There is an appendix on the Western and the thriller. These



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thoughts, it is true, do not quite amount to a system, but they certainly 'cover the field'.

The third section deals with *auteurs*—short, considered essays on Altman, Antonioni, Bertolucci, Buñuel, Coppola, Godard, Herzog, Rosi, Tarkovsky, Truffaut. (One is struck once again by the range.) In the fourth and concluding section we arrive finally at Polish cinema, with a series of observations on Wajda, Zanussi, Skolimowski, etc. It is evident that Coates, though not Polish himself, has a good knowledge of the country.

The style of the book is that of the aphorism, but not in the elegant, witty sense once associated with English *belles lettres*. Benjamin and Adorno are the German literary avatars; the book is 'Marxist' in the fantastic intellectualised manner of the Frankfurt School of the 1930s. Let me give an example from Coates' introductory paragraph on Rosi: 'For Francesco Rosi, political reality is a labyrinth. He is drawn to images of the Baroque (most obviously so in *Illustrious Corpses*, but also in the ruined allegorical landscape of *Christ Stopped at Eboli* and elsewhere) because Baroque drama was a mesh of interlocking and mutually opaque conspiracies, soaked in the narcissistic mutuality of the paranoid ruler and his assassin. Baroque—in English terms, Jacobean—dramatists share Rosi's vision of the tyrant whose short-lived omnipotence is curtailed by an equally powerful but invisible hand, which brushed him from his throne; but whereas Baroque writers mythologise the hand as the wheel of Fortuna, for Rosi it operates far more enigmatically.'

And so on. One can either take this kind of prose, or one can't. To be fair, it is not always so mannered. Here is the puzzle of the book, and the difficulty of reviewing it responsibly. An aphorism operates, by definition, on its levels of suggestiveness. Even in the passage quoted, there are the fragments of lucidity which, in certain conditions, could build up into genuine insight. In fact, there isn't a paragraph in this book that doesn't bear evidence somewhere of sustained, complex and sophisticated thought. Indeed Mr Coates dwells in the realms of thought. He has a pathological itch to convert experience into meaning. Sometimes he has the artistry to succeed. Sometimes the end result is extravagant or foolish. However, that is the risk run with this kind of undertaking. On the whole, it is a risk worth taking.

Let us return to the Marxism. It does seem to me to be a major problem. Aphorism, as a mode of writing, is by origin aristocratic

and libertarian. It is difficult to see how such a literary style can be reconciled to a system of belief as essentially deterministic as that of Marxism. (Because what, really, does Marxism say except that culture is 'explained' by its power relations?) I have been complaining—mildly—about Coates' extravagance, but in a sense one wants him to be more extravagant still. His freedom as an aphorist to 'think anything' might also be the freedom to cast doubt on the system that sustains him, and that enables him to theorise in the first place. As it is, the least authentic sections of the book (I do not quite say the least sincere) are also those most obviously indebted to Adorno. In sentence after sentence, Coates comes back to the broken, fragmented—in a word 'alienated'—condition of western man under capitalism. Yet does anyone really believe this sort of thing any more? Or rather, does anyone believe that as a generalisation it stands up to intelligent scrutiny? (How is 'capitalism' distinguishable, for example, from the industrial system at present obtaining in Poland, indeed in the Soviet Union itself?) The cadence in which Coates wraps up his metaphysical despair is too fastidious in its dedicated distaste for the West. The vocabulary is forty years out of date. It was probably out of date even in Adorno's time.

These are, I suppose, harsh words: I must repeat my observation that, intellectually speaking, *The Story of the Lost Reflection* is impressive. The culture behind it is deep and personal, as culture must be, to deserve the name. If Coates dislikes religion—as plainly he does—at least he gives evidence of knowing what is at stake in it. He may be a dialectical materialist, but he is reasonably intelligent about the ideal. His pessimism is also his strength—a strength of character. The book I believe to be in many ways erroneous in principle; but the mistakes—if that is what they are—are neither boring nor jejune. On the contrary, they are stimulating and provocative.

MARK LE FANU

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

LORENZO CODELLI is Italian correspondent for *Positif*. . . ROBERT CUSHMAN, former theatre critic of the *Observer*, is currently working on a 6-part series for Radio 4: *First Night Impressions*. . . PETER HAMES is the author of *The Czechoslovak New Wave*. . . GERALD PRATLEY is Director of the Ontario Film Institute. . . TOM STEMPER is writing a book on the history of screenwriting in the American film.

March of Time

SIR,—Max Hastings (*SIGHT AND SOUND*, Autumn 1985) writes that *March of Time* items shot by its London-based unit (of which I was director of productions) were 'scripted' in New York. This was not so. The shooting-scripts and fact-sheets relevant to the location work were prepared in London and sent with the exposed film to New York, there to guide assembly and editing. The commentary and music were then written to fit the assembled and largely silent rough-cut.

If I had ever doubted the genius with which Louis de Rochemont brought a production alive at this final but vital stage, I certainly ceased to do so when I moved to New York to join his editing team. (I cannot claim to have shared the eighty-six hour session mentioned by Max Hastings. My own record was seventy-two hours.) It was quite impossible to share such a session without being reminded of that other great artist, turned teacher in visual composition, John Grierson, who taught me five years earlier in his Empire Marketing Board cutting rooms. Both men worked primarily with the selection and conjunction of images—the role of the com-

mentary (in New York written for MOT mostly by Jimmie Shute) was to enrich, or sometimes dramatically counterpoint, the emotional facts already implicit in the rhythm of the pictures.

De Rochemont was in many ways more like some wild impresario of the kaleidoscopic opera of reality than a filmmaker. He believed that if you could only get the visual music right the words would follow (original or cliché-ridden as was appropriate). Perhaps we took a romantic view of the claims of social morality, but these can still seem to have more human validity than the numerate codes of the 'free' market economy?

Yours faithfully,
EDGAR ANSTEY
London NW11

The Best Place . . .

SIR,—As a lifelong cinemagoer wondering whether video is the only way to see films in comfort, I must raise one issue that Wally Olins ignored in his article 'The Best Place to See a Film?' (*SIGHT AND SOUND*, Autumn 1985).

It is audience behaviour that spoils cinemagoing for me. Not the occasional rustle of sweet wrappings but the people who talk intermittently, or even



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continually, through a film. This is noticeable at any cinema, including the NFT on occasion. There is also a widespread practice of kneeling or pushing the seats of people immediately in front.

Am I unusual in finding such behaviour distracting and objectionable? I usually ask in mild and polite terms if the talkers would be quiet, but the response is often glaring hostility or amazed incomprehension.

What am I to do when my request is ignored, and what help will Mr Olins' motivated management offer?

Yours faithfully,
BOB COLE
Chislehurst
Kent

SIR,—While I agree with everything that Wally Olins says about the cinema in Britain, which is in fact everything that we do already, I must point out that although technically the Wolff Olins Company had the contract for The Screen on the Hill, the people that actually did the designing—Keith Priest, Mike Fletcher and Gerry Whale—have all left Wolff Olins and are now at Fletcher-Priest Architects.

They and Ken Kennedy were responsible also for The Screen on the Green, The Screen on Baker Street and The Screen at the Electric. I feel it is only fair to them to set the record straight.

Yours faithfully,
ROMAINE HART
Mainline Pictures
London WC1

Rambo

SIR,—Surely the 'extraordinary success' of *Rambo* is due no more (as reviewer Kim Newman suggests) to its 'skilled deployment of the napalm aesthetic' than it is to its politics, than it is to its star (whose last film *Rhinestone* died), its director (Ramboites are surely not the sort of people who stay to watch credits) or even its theme. As Newman points out, *First Blood* and the escapades of Messrs Hackman and Norris in Gook-land were not runaway box-office successes. The success of *Rambo* is due entirely to the fact that it had been hyped and over-hyped for some three months before its British release.

Yes, Richard Farnsworth (who gets no mention in the Newman review) has taught the stuntmen to leap the flames with great precision but, having said that, *Rambo* is a film of no aesthetic value. Its validity is solely as a publicity exercise, a demonstration of how a film can make ackers by being ramboed down the punters' throats. In an issue stuffed with 'hopeful' articles about the renaissance British cinema and something called

British Film Year, I find it jolly sad that such a film not only gets precedence over better efforts in the review pages (as it has done in the cinemas) but is afforded a 'meaningful' focus.

Yours faithfully,
DON MINIFIE
Whitstable
Kent

History or Art?

SIR,—The restoration of *Nosferatu* (1922) shown at the NFT recently may be a triumph for history, but it was a disaster for art. The restorers dug up 33 intertitles (captions) thought to have been in the original release and added them to the existing version. Most viewers will agree that most of the titles are unnecessary and ridiculous. Even purely technically they do not help the all-important relation between successive shots, as perversely claimed in the programme notes, but destroy it.

Instead of adding titles, the creative thing to do would be to take out all but the few absolutely essential ones. Murnau in his later films tended toward avoiding intertitles altogether to keep the visual poetry inviolate. That he would be grateful for such enlightened initiative, who can doubt; and so would audiences.

Yours faithfully,
W. MICHEL
Colchester
Essex

Elf No 24

SIR,—As one of the elves who worked on the *Santa Claus* production, I would like to take issue with the curmudgeonly reviewer of our labours ('On Now', Autumn 1985) whose name you have perhaps advisedly concealed. Admittedly, the film like all films is a capitalistic enterprise aiming to make money and on which a great deal of money (too much) has been spent, but its aim is also genuinely to delight very young children who are the same in essence as children of thirty or sixty years ago—all is new to them. They are wide open to adult influences, which should surely be innocent and benign.

It can hardly be claimed that the film industry in general is alive to these responsibilities, preferring on the whole to chase the fast buck of corruption. The importance of your publication demands a fair and constructive approach to the reviewing of such major films as *Santa Claus*—many years in preparation with distinguished names and talents both artistic and technical contributing to an offering which in the nature of things will be seen by millions and revived for many years to come. Favourable notice is not urged for, but certainly

balanced appraisal would be appreciated.

May I conclude by remarking that the sweatshops of elfland portrayed the elves rejoicing in their labours in the time-honoured fashion of films from socialist states, and we were grinning because we had jobs.

Yours faithfully,
Elf No 24
JIM SMITH
Bushey
Herts

Ysani unearthed

SIR,—I was interested—and surprised—to see a reference to *Ysani the Priestess* (she was no *Princess*) in the review of *Film Making in 1930s Britain* (SIGHT AND SOUND, Autumn 1985). I thought she had long been returned to her sarcophagus. I well remember playing this film—or

should I say booking this act?—at my cinema in Windsor, the Empire, in July 1938. Raven Wood and his wife were one of those mind-reading acts popular at the time, the gimmick being that while he circulated among the audience asking 'Ysani, what am I holding in my right hand?' the Priestess would promptly reply from the screen. It made quite an effective novelty but could hardly justify classification as a film, the reel consisting as I recall of just one unvaried shot of Ysani gazing into her crystal ball with the voice emanating from Mrs Wood ensconced backstage. It was certainly short, for I see the programme included not only two features and a newsreel, but an Edgar Kennedy comedy.

Yours faithfully,
JOHN WATSHAM
Lostwithiel
Cornwall

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

COLUMBIA-EMI-WARNER for *Year of the Dragon*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Taxi Driver*, *Bloody Mama*, photograph of John Boorman.

RANK FILM DISTRIBUTORS for *A Chorus Line*, *The Lightship*.

THORN EMI for photographs of Gary Dartnall, Verity Lambert.

20th CENTURY FOX for *The King of Comedy*.

UIP for *The Godfather Part II*, *New York, New York*, *Falling in Love*, *Sunday*, *Bloody Sunday*, *Raging Bull*.

ARTIFICIAL EYE for *A Zed & Two Nothings*.

EAGLE FILMS for *Greetings*.

MAINLINE PICTURES for *My Beautiful Laundrette*.

PALACE PICTURES for *A Letter to Brezhnev*, *No Surrender*.

VIRGIN FILMS for *Heroine*, *The Ploughman's Lunch*.

GOLDCREST for *Revolution*, *The Mission*, *Absolute Beginners*, photographs of Jake Eberts, James Lee, Sandy Lieberman.

PALACE PRODUCTIONS for *Mona Lisa*.

RKO/E.R. PRESSMAN CORPORATION/ GEOFF REEVE PRODUCTIONS for *Half Moon Street*.

SKREBA PRODUCTIONS for *Comrades*.

ZENITH PRODUCTIONS for *Sid and Nancy Love Kills*.

FUJI PHOTO FILM (UK) for Fuji Film Award ceremony, *Child's Play*.

THE POST OFFICE for British Film Year stamps.

THRESHOLD CORP/SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION/LOCKHEED CORP for *The Dream Is Alive*.

GREEK FILM CENTRE/ERT TV for *The Stone Years*.

ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE ARTS AND SCIENCES for *Her Candy Kid*, *A Clever Dummy*, Hampton Del Ruth.

JOHN KOBAL COLLECTION for Mack Sennett unit on set.

NESTOR ALMENDROS for *Improper Conduct*.

DEBORAH BEER/FASO FILM/PEA for *Ginger and Fred*.

LORENZO CODELLI for *La Serpa*.

SIMON FARRELL for photograph of Mark Le Fanu.

ED IRONSIDE for Oxford Film Foundation Seminar.

CAROLYN JOHNS for photograph of Carole Myer.

NICOLAS ROEG for photograph of Amanda Donohoe, Lucy Irvine.

STEN M. ROSENBLUND for photograph of De Niro at the NFT.

BBC TV for *King of the Ghetto*.

CENTRAL TV for *The Empress and the Munshi*, *Here and Now*.

CHANNEL 4 for *Tandoori Nights*, photograph of Farrukh Dhondy.

BFI PRODUCTION for *Caravaggio*.

MOMI/DAVID WATSON for Museum of the Moving Image site.

NFA STILLS COLLECTION for *Gertrud*, *Fake*, *Idi Amin Dada*, photographs of Mack Sennett, Sam Peckinpah, Simone Signoret, Louise Brooks.

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●KISS OF THE SPIDER WOMAN

(Palace)

In a threatening, anonymous prison somewhere in South America, Molina (William Hurt), a forever sighing homosexual and an incorrigible fantasist, is promised freedom if he extracts information from his cellmate Valentin (Raul Julia), a guarded, distrustful revolutionary. Molina inevitably falls in love; and, less predictably, finds his affection briefly, but tenderly, returned. Scripted by Leonard Schrader from the Manuel Puig novel, this English-language Brazilian/us feature from Hector Babenco (*Pixote*), is loaded, sometimes melodramatically, with political significance. The film's tone, however, scootsoff in all sorts of non-political directions and this is what makes it so unexpectedly attractive. Babenco mixes a standard prison-cell drama (the delights of the food parcel, two unlikely souls who find they need each other, etc) with overheated snatches of the 'film', which Molina tells to while away the nights, to disquieting effect. The principals fill out their roles in this virtual two-hander with both authority and passion, all the better for being, until the end, damped down. (Sonia Braga.)

●MISHIMA: A LIFE IN FOUR CHAPTERS

(Columbia-EMI-Warner)

Paul Schrader takes on the controversial Japanese figure—novelist, homosexual and right-wing polemicist—who staged a demented act of military provocation in 1970 before committing ritual suicide. 'Takes on', in fact, in every sense, since Schrader has attempted more than the usual bio-pic, has used his film to exemplify Mishima:

the aesthete who longed to be a man of action; the narcissist who longed to shatter the world of mirrors in which he lived. This the film accomplishes with a constant revolution in its own reality. Mishima's military coup is used as a framing story, there are biographical flashbacks in black and white, and excerpts from three of his novels in highly coloured, stylised inserts. The result is breathtaking formally and as a provocation in its own right; but it is also paradoxically rather monotonous, in that it only allows us to understand Mishima as he understood himself. (Ken Ogata, Yasosuke Bando, Kenji Sawada.)

●NINETEEN NINETEEN

(BFI)

Former patients of Freud, the Russian-born Alexander Scherbatov and the Austrian Sophie Rubin, meet in Vienna fifty years on to reminisce about their failed treatments. Their memories, spanning childhood moments, the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution, are woven by scriptwriter Michael Ignatieff into a rich and fascinating mosaic: history is questioned, as is the efficacy of psycho-analytic treatment. Alexander and Sophie both break the rules: he by marrying a bourgeois woman unacceptable to his aristocratic family, she by falling in love with a woman. Offering no answers to the riddles of neurosis and transgression, the film-makers also leave open the relationship between private actions and public events. Strong performances from Paul Scofield and Maria Schell carry a crafted, provoking and, at times, keenly poignant film. (Diana Quick, Frank Finlay; director, Hugh Brody.)

AGNES OF GOD

(Columbia-EMI-Warner)

In a Montreal convent, a novice is accused of strangling her illegitimate baby, leaving mother superior Anne Bancroft and psychiatrist Jane Fonda to argue over the evidence and the likelihood of miracles. A sort of murder mystery combined with sort of an examination of the mysteries of faith, rendered both fragmentary and cut and dried by Norman Jewison's schematic direction.

THE ANGELIC CONVERSATION

(BFI)

Made on Super-8 and blown up to 35mm, the latest contribution to Derek Jarman's highly personal oeuvre marries intense and rainy gay erotica with Shakespeare's sonnets, here read by Judi Dench. Sometimes pleasingly evocative, at other times fringing the pretentious. (Paul Reynolds, Phillip Williamson.)

ARGIE

(ICA)

Despite a winning central idea—a beleaguered Argentinian waging a Woody Allen-like private campaign against London during the Falklands

war—the narrative drive of *Argie* is so weak that the project quickly flounders. Self-indulgent characterisation and sloppy comic timing fail to prevent relegation to the 'unfulfilled promise' category. (Jorge Blanco, Christine Plisson; director, Jorge Blanco.)

THE BRIDE

(Columbia-EMI-Warner)

The Bride of Frankenstein as a misbegotten exercise in wet liberal feminism: the script abandons Sting's Dr Frankenstein, while Jennifer Beals' monster is among the most vapid in the movies. Meanwhile, in an unconnected part of the film, Clancy Brown's Mark One Monster valiantly tries to give a performance despite being smothered in treacle by David Rappaport. (Director, Franc Roddam.)

CAT'S EYE

(Columbia-EMI-Warner)

Three slender Stephen King anecdotes linked by a wandering pussycat. The first, in which James Woods is 'helped' to give up smoking by the Mafia, has its moments, but the rest is very standard stuff. Coming Next: *Stephen King's Laundry List*. (Drew Barrymore, Candy Clark, Kenneth McMillan; director, Lewis Teague.)

COLONEL REDL

(Cannon-Gala)

This evocative, sumptuous, measured and often glancingly affecting account of the Redl Affair (after John Osborne's *A Patriot for Me*) is sustained by two powerhouse performances from Klaus Maria Brandauer, as the tragic principal, and Armin Müller-Stahl, as the twisting Archduke Franz Ferdinand. A certain predictability is overcome by director Istvan Szabo's palpable seriousness of purpose. (Gudrun Landgrebe.)

DEFENCE OF THE REALM

(Rank)

Reporter Gabriel Byrne senses the net of a sinister Whitehall establishment tightening round him in this dark and pacy cover-up thriller, photographed by Roger Deakins and scripted by Martin Stellman. Convincingly played against the backdrop of a seedy tabloid world, the plot, regrettably, never really gives the hero a chance: the murders come two-a-penny. (Greta Scacchi, Denholm Elliott, Bill Paterson; director, David Drury.)

KING SOLOMON'S MINES

(Cannon)

In this would-be high-spirited adventure, Richard Chamberlain sends himself up nicely as Quatermain, while Herbert Lom and John Rhys-Davies overdo the villainy as a brutal Hun and a nefarious Turk. There is an impressive cannibal cookpot, but disappointingly sluggish monsters. (Director, J. Lee-Thompson.)

LOVE LETTERS

(ICA)

Classical music disc-jockey Jamie Lee Curtis discovers a

cache of old letters written to her mother by a departed lover. Under their influence, she embarks on an affair with married photographer James Keach. A sensitive, unsentimental romance, tactfully directed by Amy Jones of *The Slumber Party Massacre* and produced by Roger Corman. (Amy Madigan, Bud Cort, Matt Clark.)

PUMPING IRON II: THE WOMEN

(Blue Dolphin)

A sharp vérité documentary which follows four female body-builders through a major competition, opening up the feminist issues as judges fret over padded bras, the extraordinary physique of power-lifter Bev Francis, the tension between femininity and muscle development, and the conflict between sport and glamour. (Director, George Butler.)

RETURN OF THE LIVING DEAD

(Tartan)

This spin-off from George Romero's zombie movies is a pastiche in the EC horror comic style. Director Dan O'Bannon handles the sick humour with splattery panache, and there are some scene-stealing monsters—particularly a loose-limbed tatterdemalion who repeatedly chants 'more brains'—but the low budget sometimes tells. (Clu Gulager, James Karen, Don Calfa.)

TURTLE DIARY

(Rank)

Thinned out in a Pinter script, Russell Hoban's visionary novel is reduced to a thing of pregnant pauses and lonely Hampstead literati feeling sorry for themselves and the turtles in the zoo. Very twee. (Glenda Jackson, Ben Kingsley; director, John Irvin.)

WEIRD SCIENCE

(UIP)

Nerds Anthony Michael Hall and Ian Mitchell-Smith programme their computer to create the perfect woman, and come up with Kelly LeBrock as a Mary Poppins for eager adolescents. A slob comedy whose problems of construction and bad taste are outweighed by the curious innocence of the fantasy. Very funny in parts. (Director, John Hughes.)

WHEN FATHER WAS AWAY ON BUSINESS

(Cannon-Gala)

A jilted mistress uses the confusion of de-Stalinisation to turn her ex-lover, the young hero's father, over to the secret police, thus precipitating a major family crisis. Narrated from the child's point of view, this is a witty, affectionate and moving portrait of childhood under Tito, set in the mid-1950s in Southern Yugoslavia, where traditional peasant culture and revolutionary modernism sit uneasily and often comically together. (Moreno de Bartoli, Miki Manojlović; director, Emir Kusturica.)

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